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Dynamics of Assertive Labour Movementism in Ethiopia: Organised Labour, Unrest and Wages in a Socio-Historical Perspective

A dissertation submitted to the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Pavia and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Basel in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Presented by:

Samuel Andreas Admasie

Under the Supervision of:

Massimo Zaccaria, Università di Pavia

Elisio Macamo, University of Basel

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

AALC	African-American Labor Center
AATUF	All-African Trade Union Federation [merged into OATUU in 1973]
AETU	All-Ethiopia Trade Union [renamed ETU in 1986]
AESM	All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement [also abbreviated MEISON]
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AMC	Agricultural Marketing Corporation
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
CBE	Commercial Bank of Ethiopia
CDE	*Compagnie du Chemin de Fer Djibouto-Ethiopien* [named CFE prior to 1981]
CELU	Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions
CETU	Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions
CFE	*Compagnie du Chemin de Fer Franco-Ethiopien* [named CDE after March 1981]
CFELU	Confederation of Free Eritrean Labour Unions
COPWE	Commission to Organise the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia
CoR	Council of Representatives
CSA	Central Statistical Agency
DBE	Development Bank of Ethiopia
DoS	Department of State [United States]
EAL	Ethiopian Airlines
EDDC	Ethiopian Domestic Distribution Corporation
EELPA	Ethiopian Electric Light and Power Authority
EH	Ethiopian Herald
EHRCO	Ethiopian Human Rights Council
ELAMA	Ethiopian Workers' Revolutionary Union
ELU	Ethiopian Labour Union
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ETA	Ethiopian Teachers' Association
ETB	Ethiopian Birr
ETU	Ethiopian Trade Union [named AETU prior to 1986]
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FEE	Federation of Employers of Ethiopia
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
FTO	Full-time official
GA	General Assembly
HVA	*Handelsvereniging Amsterdam*
IEG	Imperial Ethiopian Government
ION	Indian Ocean Newsletter
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IISH	International Institute of Social History
ISF	International Solidarity Fund
IFPAAW	International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers
ILO	International Labour Organization/Office

IMF	International Monetary Fund
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
LRB	Labour Relations Board
MEISON	All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement [also abbreviated AESM]
MNCD	Ministry of National and Community Development
MoFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
NTC	National Textile Corporation
OATUU	Organisation of African Trade Union Unity
PDRE	People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
PFTUSM	Peace and Free Trade Union Seeking Members of CETU's General Council
PLUSD	Public Library of US Diplomacy
POMOA	Provisional Office for Mass Organisational Affairs
PMAC	Provisional Military Administrative Council
PMGE	Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia
PMGSE	Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia
PWC	Provisional Workers' Committee
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
WCL	World Confederation of Labour
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions
WPE	Workers' Party of Ethiopia

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

The Ethiopian economy has been expanding at a relatively high pace through most of the 2000s. The rapid growth of the wage-working labour force is a major aspect of this. Over the last half-decade, the number of people engaged in paid employment has more than doubled[1]. As of recently, the government has made structural transformation through the rapid development of a labour intensive manufacturing sector – a sector that has been stagnant at around 5 percent of GDP for many decades (World Bank 2015) – a top priority[2]. This has created much buzz in both scholarly and policy circles. The Ethiopian economy is discussed in terms of 'a continental manufacturing hub', a budding 'new China' and 'an African lion' ready to transform into an industrial economy with a manufacturing workforce numbering in the millions (Gelb et al. 2017; Kushkush 2015; Mills 2016; MoFED 2016; Wuilbercq 2017).

The key feature making the Ethiopian economy attractive to manufacturing development – readily noted in each of the above mentioned upbeat accounts of its potentials – is the low cost of labour in the country. Official and authoritative accounts demonstrate that the government views this state of things as the central component of its strategy to develop the manufacturing sector (MoFED 2016; Mills 2016). Moreover, when labour is the subject of state attention, it is treated merely as a factor of production[3]. The problem of labour, whenever it is posed, is neither related to social justice nor betterment of conditions, but to increasing surpluses through, on the one hand, raising productivity, and, on the other, assuring that costs – i.e. wages – remain low. However, the position of labour in the Ethiopian political economy and the level of real wages have not always been characterised by the poverty they contemporarily are. As will be made evident, there have been

[1] See Admasie (2015) for a discussion of these figures.

[2] Industrialisation is considered an important task for several reasons. One is that manufacturing enables higher levels of value addition and the export of higher-priced goods that can close the catastrophic gap in the balance of trade. In a 2016 report to parliament, Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn acknowledged that export volume accounted to only 16 percent of imports (Dawit 2016). This has aggravated the chronic scarcity of foreign exchange to an acute level, among other things leading to the most recent devaluation of the Ethiopian Birr, in October 2017. Also important, however, is the dynamic quality of the sector that allows it to absorb large amounts of labour. This task is an urgent one, as the Ethiopian economy is subject to an annual entry of over one million new job-seekers (UNCTAD 2013).

[3] Senior government official Arkebe Oqubay's (2015) account of industrial policy in Ethiopia is a perfect illustration of this view.

times when Ethiopian labour carried significant socio-political clout and when it was compensated considerably better for its efforts. The current situation, celebrated as it may be by profiteers, is thus not a natural state of things, but the outcome of a historical process of contestation. That process is the subject of this dissertation.

Effective contestation, however, is not likely to be achieved by atomised workers operating in isolation, but requires the compounded leverage and force that comes with an organised purposeful collectivity. Workers organise collectively in order to offset the structural power of capital which is overwhelming when confronted on an individual basis, and to enhance their own collective leverage. While this is the general logic and purpose of trade unionism, the strategic orientation – the precise goals and the manners in which those goals are thought to be achieved – that unions adopt is subject to contention. Trade unions thus constitute an instrument *and* an arena of struggle, and they occupy a central place within labour movements. However, as collective organisation and action takes place outside the formal structures of trade unions as much as within them, labour movements are not reducible to trade unions alone. Contention over orientation also takes place across the broader movement. There is ample evidence in the literature that the level of assertiveness of labour movements has a positive correlation with improvements in working conditions and wage levels[4]. When workers organise autonomously, actively engage in struggle over labour rights and wages, and adopt an assertive strategy backed by militant practices to achieve this, the outcomes can generally be expected to be more beneficial than when co-opted structures and deferential strategies are imposed over a dormant workforce. A large body of scholarly literature has explored the factors that condition the adoption of different orientations within labour movements. Taxonomies that separate business unionism from radical political unionism, and trade union consciousness from revolutionary class consciousness, have been developed within this body of literature, and a host of categories and models have been proposed to explain varying outcomes. While much of this discussion has taken place among scholars based in industrialised economies, analytical insights have also been drawn from the experience of labour movements in Africa, particularly when it comes to the explicit political aspects of labour movements. Despite the positive achievements of assertive strategies on the part of labour movements, a number of factors that work to limit assertiveness have been identified. These

[4] See, for instance, Silver (2003) for a global and historical analysis of the correlation between wages and strikes.

pertain to issues such as internal bureaucratisation and the effects of confining political-economic structures, as well as external pressures from capital and the state. In several African settings, the literature has demonstrated how such pressures have been enhanced by the relatively minor size of the wage working population, the weak economic base and poor finances of the labour movement, its historical links to ruling parties, and national/ethnic divisions that have been viewed as undermining class solidarities.

In the context of Ethiopia, however, these discussions have remained largely unexplored. There are reasons to assume that many of the factors that have produced weak and co-opted labour movements in general, and in Africa in particular, should also pertain in Ethiopia. In light of this, historical manifestations of an assertive labour movement that engage in militant practices and adopt strategies of confrontation rather than co-option call for an explanation. At the same time, there is evidence indicating a correlation between the shifting orientation of the labour movement and the structural position of labour: real wages and labour rights peaked with the most assertive phase of Ethiopian labour movement history, and wages have since fallen sharply, while labour rights have significantly deteriorated, as the labour movement has taken on a more deferential, timid and co-opted outlook[5]. This observation calls for a more complete investigation of the determinants that have enabled such assertiveness, and the linkage between the collective agency of workers and the position of labour in the Ethiopian context.

A key issue that emerges here is that of the orientation of the labour movement: the goals, strategies and methods that are adopted and the degree to which such goals, strategies and methods are underlined by militant practices. As the orientation is likely to have a significant impact on outcomes, a crucial element in examining the outcomes of workers' agency consists of identifying the factors and dynamics that determine this orientation. The task of analysing these dynamics is thus one of central importance, when concerned with the position and conditions of labour. In the context of Ethiopia, that importance is magnified in the contemporary conjuncture, where an increasing part of the population is becoming reliant on waged labour.

Despite this, the Ethiopian labour movement has drawn little serious scholarly interest. When not ignored altogether, the importance of the movement has tended to be dismissed. Scholars have

[5] Although indications of this wage movement for a limited time period can be found in the literature (Mulatu and Yohannis 1988: 108-109), more conclusive evidence of this assertion can be found in chapter six of this dissertation.

characterised the movement as too miniscule and weak to have any meaningful influence, or so controlled and/or co-opted as to render it a mere transmission belt of the state (Dessalegn 2002: 114; Paulos 2006, Sisay 2002). This contrasts with the key role the movement has played at important conjunctures in the recent past, and with the consistent attention paid to it by the state under three consecutive governments, as well as by other political actors, indicating a high importance attributed to it by such actors[6]. It also raises the question of whether these actors display an irrational level of concern or whether it is the scholarly community that is overlooking the importance of a potentially powerful social force. Despite claims of its irrelevance in terms of size, the movement arguably constitutes the country's largest organised social force[7], which has survived prolonged periods of suppression and repression. In this observation lays a clear indication that, to workers, collective organisation remains a compelling strategy that is unlikely to lessen in attractiveness as the wage working proportion of the population grows. On another level, the claims of external control and co-option has repeatedly been contradicted by a movement that has, at key conjunctures, autonomously adopted a strategy of confrontation, articulated alternative political-economic programmes, and asserted itself vis-à-vis the state and employers (Kiflu 1998; Praeg 2006: 185-196). This would imply that despite the appearance of control and co-option, such control and co-option is conditional and qualified at most, and that intense and continuous state attention is motivated by the potential of the movement. As the scarce research that has been conducted on the movement has tended to focus on the trade union leadership and its relation to the state alone, little is known about the broader dynamics that propel the movement and determine its outlook. Equally little is known about its historical effects on the political economy and labour regime that it operates within and exerts pressures upon. The ability to say anything conclusive about the potential of the movement is thus severely restricted.

When considered by social scientists and historians, the assertive phases of the Ethiopian labour movement have been subsumed under the broad contexts of the Ethiopian revolution in the 1970s or the politics of transition, in the early 1990s. This constitutes a grave simplification – the orientation of the labour movement is subject to more complex dynamics than merely a determinant influence of whatever political conjuncture. In a similar manner, changes in the labour

[6] For a discussion on the importance the current ruling party attaches to the exercise of control over the unions, see EPRDF (1996: 27).
[7] Total union membership was estimated to be 350 00 in 2010, and rapidly growing (ILO 2013).

regime – in the rare instances they are discussed – have been treated as direct outcomes of statal edicts, subject only to the whims of different administrations. This too constitutes a most severe simplification. The Ethiopian labour movement and labour regime have evolved in an interlinked manner over the past many decades with both secular trends and cyclical movements, both glaring continuities and sharp discontinuities, discernible. The impact of state policy constitute only one out of many factors that have influenced this conjoined evolution, and cannot be treated as the simple mechanical determinant of these outcomes. Neither can the position of labour within the Ethiopian political economy be reduced to the outcome of economistic[8] factors alone. Rather, a more complex mode of explanation must be attempted. In analysing the determination of the position of labour, the orientation and force of the labour movement must be taken into consideration, and vice versa. This involves examining both structural factors residing within the political-economic configuration and the collective agency of workers, expressed in the movement of labour and conditioned by orientation of this movement. For it is when, where and how the collective agency of workers is pitted against adversarial categories and classes, within and against constraining structures in which that agency is formed, that these structures are reproduced or altered – and it is at the moment of reproduction or alteration of those structures that the position of labour is determined[9].

Not only, then, has the orientation of the Ethiopian labour movement been treated as externally and mechanically determined, but so has the nature of the labour regime. No substantial discussion on the forces that have determined wage levels, labour conditions, and rights can be found in the literature, only separate discussions which assume that one factor or another – be it productivity levels or the repressive inclinations of various governments – has been decisive**.** However, the determination of the nature of the labour regime – including wages and labour rights – takes place within complex socio-historical processes that cannot be reduced to one external or contextual factor or another. In the Ethiopian context, where this issue has so consistently been ignored or

[8] Meaning a narrow focus on economic aspects, which are in turn reduced to reified and fetishised markets, and conceived of as autonomous of other social phenomena.

[9] The view, articulated by Nicos Poulantzas (1978), of the relation between social structure and agency is a compelling and relevant one: it is the class struggle that mediates between the two and, in the final instance, determines the reproduction or alteration of those social structures. Since the subject of this dissertation is constituent of class struggle, it has obvious bearings on this dissertation.

treated in a reductionist manner, a more comprehensive treatment of the problem is therefore necessary.

The rationale of this research project can thus be found in the paucity of literature on the Ethiopian labour movement, on the determinants of its shifting orientation and force, and on its impact on the political economy and labour regime in which it operates. To this extent, this research project aims to highlight the complex relationship of determinants of the orientation of the movement of labour and the evolving labour regime by locating them within the broad socio-historical processes that shape them, and thereby pose questions about the validity of reductionist state-centred explanations. The omissions in the literature that have resulted both from a singular reductionist focus on the relationship between trade unions and the state, and a dismissive attitude towards the achievements and potentials of the Ethiopian labour movement, can in this manner be overcome. This is a particularly urgent task within a conjuncture in which the Ethiopian wage labour population is growing exponentially whereas the conditions of labour remain wanting. Finally, this project also goes some length towards examining the validity of categories and theoretical models inherited from quite different historical, social and political-economic settings, within the setting of an African multinational political economy, in the midst of a renewed push towards capitalist industrialisation.

1.2 Objective

The central objective of this dissertation is to examine the interplay between the orientation of the Ethiopian labour movement and the shifting position of wage labour within the Ethiopian political economy. This includes the examination of the factors that have determined the orientation of the Ethiopian labour movement at key conjunctures – that has contributed to the growth and the decline in assertiveness of the movement – by investigating the relation between internal and external aspects in the process by which this orientation is established. These external aspects crucially include the effects of the movement on the position of labour within the political-economic context and the labour regime, as these structures condition the movement and as its impact on them affect the appeal of different orientations in light of the effects registered. It is assumed that this facilitates a better understanding of the conditions under which autonomous and assertive labour movementism becomes possible – in general, but in Ethiopia in particular – and what the effects of such autonomous and assertive labour movementism may entail.

1.3 Focus and scope

The key conjunctures that are examined are the cycles of advances and retreats; and of shifting orientation in terms of growth and decline in assertiveness of the Ethiopian labour movement over the last six decades or so. This corresponds to the period in which organised labour has been legal in the country and in which the labour movement has existed as a country-wide phenomenon. Two consummated cycles have been identified: the first spanning from the early 1960s to the late 1970s and the second from the late-1980s to mid-1990s. Special focus is given to the conjunctures that stand out in terms of labour assertiveness and unrest. Meanwhile, the evolving position of labour, as well as the levels of industrial unrest and strike activity, is mapped over the full period.

The main organisational frame of labour over this period has been the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU) and its successor organisations the All-Ethiopian Trade Union (AETU), the Ethiopian Trade Union (ETU), and the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU). This organisation has a central place in the research. However, since all consecutive legislations have made it nearly impossible for unions to call strikes – indeed, no strike has yet been considered legal by concerned authorities – and since transgressions have come with punitive sanctions, including the threat of dissolution of the offending union, strikes and unrest have throughout the history of the Ethiopian labour movement had to be organised largely outside the formal structures of the trade unions. Moreover, as the state has repeatedly clamped down on the labour movement and brought its force to bear on the formal structures of the trade unions, opposition, militancy and resistance has been forced to relocate to external formal and informal structures. Such structures, being part and parcel of the broader labour movement, are also covered in the research. This, however, is only so to the extent that operations are directly related to labour – such as in terms of the struggle over the movement's orientation or the labour regime. More specifically political dynamics have been covered in detail elsewhere, and are here only discussed to the extent to which they are directly relevant to the subject area.

1.4 Research problem and questions

The literature has outlined a number of internal and external constraints that tend to limit the assertiveness and moderate the outlook and practices of labour and trade union movements. Such constraints have been considered subject to enhancement by a number of factors pertaining specifically to labour movements in African contexts. Several of these have obvious relevance to

the Ethiopian context, and the scholarly impression has indeed been that the Ethiopian labour movement has been small, weak, controlled and co-opted. It is in light of these constraints and impressions that the reoccurrence of an assertive labour movementism calls for explanation.

The first question to guide the research is the following:

What factors explain the orientation of the Ethiopian labour movement?

It is assumed that while the agency of workers – exercised through the labour movement – affects the position of labour, the nature of this agency is dependent on the orientation of the labour movement. This calls attention to the precise nature of this relation. A second question is therefore posed as follows:

In what manner does the orientation of the labour movement affect the position of labour within the Ethiopian political economy?

It is moreover assumed that the effects of the movement on the position of labour reflect back on the orientation of the movement in terms of what strategies that are made possible and viable, and what appeal different strategies assert in light of those effects. Since the answers to the two questions above then impinge and depend on one another, the overarching question of this research is the following:

What characterises the interplay between the orientation of the Ethiopian labour movement and the shifting position of wage labour in the Ethiopian political economy?

1.5 Research design, methods and sources

Different sources and types of data, both qualitative and quantitative, are required to answer the questions posed. First, an outline of the social and political-economic context in which the subject of the study – the Ethiopian labour movement – has emerged and evolved is required. This discussion is based primarily on qualitative data gathered from the literature, but also from grey material and archival sources.

Once the context has been set, the evolution of the Ethiopian labour movement is discussed. Here, the aim is to analyse periods of diverging orientation and shifting clout of the movement, and identify the factors and dynamics that have determined this. The discussion is broken into two chapters dealing with two separately identifiable cycles of growth and decline in assertiveness of

the movement. Factors such as bureaucratisation; rank-and-file pressure; the impact of the social, political and economic context; the operation of different entities within the movement; and the role of the state are discussed. This section – which, in combination with the subsequent one, constitutes the centre of the dissertation around which the remaining sections pivot – relies on primary and secondary qualitative data gathered from a host of sources consulted. The primary sources include documentation from the archives of the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the International Labour Organisation, and the Tom Killion Papers at the Hoover Institution; as well as interviews with key informants who have participated in or interacted with the labour movement over the past 60 years. A database of digitised files of the archival material collected, ranging between 20 000 – 30 000 pages has been established to draw upon, and the interviews have been transcribed resulting in some 300 pages of transcripts. Secondary sources include the literature available on the movement, grey material from the archives and libraries consulted, theses and dissertations, and bulletins and pamphlets aligned to political movements[10]. In addition to this, two sources that have been drawn upon should be mentioned. The first one is a database of newspaper labour-related articles from the government owned daily *Ethiopian Herald*, which was established in the process of the research and contains some 500 articles. Another source that warrants mention is the Public Library of US Diplomacy published online by the whistle-blower organisation WikiLeaks. This database contains around 100 cables from the US embassy in Addis Ababa pertaining to the Ethiopian labour movement in the years here concerned with.

In order to establish the manner in which the movement's orientation and the position of labour are connected, the next step is to analyse – in relation to one another – two factors that are taken as indicators of these: levels of labour unrest and real wages[11]. It is presumed that the former indicates the assertiveness and level of militant activity of the labour movement – its orientation and force – while the latter is an indication of a central aspect of the labour regime as defined in the below: the distribution of surpluses, and would therefore indicate the position of labour within the political economy. Data on unrest has been compiled from a range of sources. This includes all mention of strikes found in the secondary literature, reports, interviews, newspapers, and archival sources.

[10] A large number such publications, have been collected for and under the auspices of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam during the early phases of this research project.

[11] In terms of wages as an indicator of position, it is indeed the case, as Cohn (1993: 4) has stated, that ‘wages are the single greatest issue in industrial conflict’.

Additionally it includes what little statistics and fragmented time-series that are available on number of labour disputes and court cases registered by the authorities. Since no comprehensive statistics have been compiled on unrest, strike activity or labour disputes – neither in a published form nor as existing in the archives – this entails a degree of qualitative description, and the measurement a number of incomplete sources against each other in order to establish an impression of general levels. The level of real wages is then measured over the last five decades using Central Statistical Agency data that has been deflated by the price index of Addis Ababa. The data only pertains to wages in the manufacturing sector. While the part of the workforce engaged within this sector has certainly been, and currently is, a relatively small part of the wage working population, it can be argued that measuring the wages of this section of the workforce alone corresponds to the aims of this research project. This is because manufacturing workers were among the first to be permitted to unionise – as workers in the agrarian sector and civil servants, for example, were subject to restrictions – and for a long periods have had the highest level of union density. As measuring the potential impact of the labour movement is most conducively conducted where its presence is most conspicuous, it therefore makes good sense to focus on the manufacturing sector. Another reason for this focus, however, is pragmatic and pertains to the availability of data, which, save civil servants, is not readily available in other sectors. In the manufacturing sector, CSA data on aggregate wages has been compiled, and such data can be complemented by data from digitised factory archives, which contain individual wages. That is not the case for wage workers in the agrarian and service sectors. Nevertheless, by reference to the literature and reports from the archives consulted, estimations of non-manufacturing wages is also discussed.

When the shifting historical levels of unrest and real wages have been mapped, a discussion on the prevalence and nature of relationship between them is conducted. But in order to test the quality of CSA macro-data and the schematic periodisation of unrest drawn up, in order to permit the disaggregation of the macro-data data found in CSA statistics, and in order to illustrate local variances, two case studies precedes this discussion. The case studies, moreover, contribute to a better understanding of the labour movement at the level which contestation generally plays out: that of the workplace.

The first and most expansive case study is that of the Bahir Dar Textile Factory. The context of the factory and its union is discussed. This discussion relies on qualitative data drawn from

repeated research stays in Bahir Dar, interviews with key participants, material from the CETU and ICFTU archives, and from the digitised personnel archive of the factory. Data gathered from a sample of workers' personnel files is thereafter used to measure shifting wage levels at the factory. They are then examined against national statistics and disaggregated wages and unrest levels for managerial and non-managerial employees, as well as for female and male employees. A second case study is drawn from the archives of the Ethio-Djibouti Railway[12]. Here, more robust sources of literature can be drawn upon, including Tom Killion's (1985; 1992) work on the subject. Additionally, the archives of CETU and ICFTU contain ample information on this historically important union. Interviews and repeated visits to Dire Dawa, where the railway headquarters are located, have complemented this. While it would have been ideal to include a larger number of case studies here, the limits imposed by time and resource constraints have meant that two such case studies must suffice. The archives of the particular case studies benefited from being the objects of two digitisation projects conducted by the International Institute of Social History[13] (IISH) in collaboration with Bahir Dar University, the Bahir Dar Textile Share Company, Dire Dawa University and the Ethio-Djibouti Railway Corporation. The resources required to execute these projects were significant, and it took over a year for three project staff members to complete the former, and nine months for two project staff members to complete a sample of the latter. The digitised collection of 4221 workers' files from the Bahir Dar Textile Factory that are the outcome of the first project constitutes a unique resource of Ethiopian labour history. In Dire Dawa, only a pilot project has been completed to date[14], and as a result the number of digitised files drawn upon is more limited. Nevertheless, data from a randomised sample of 850 files from Bahir Dar and 300 from the railways have been entered into two databases, organised and analysed using the SPSS software.

The data drawn upon, analysed and presented, it is argued, allows, first, for the identification of the factors – internal and external – that has contributed to growth and decline in labour assertiveness over the years, and the examination of the relation and dynamics between these factors. Second, it allows for the identification of various outcomes in terms of the shifting position of labour, and the examination of the factors behind these outcomes. From this discussion, the

[12] These consist only of workers employed on the Ethiopian stretch of the railway. The workers on the Djibouti stretch have consistently been separately administered.
[13] In which I was involved as the IISH's regional representative.
[14] In late 2017 the French Centre of Ethiopian Studies joined the project, assuring its revival for 2018.

interplay between the orientation of the labour movement and the position of labour can be examined in more detail. The findings are discussed and interpreted with reference to labour movement theorisation, theorisation on the link between workers' agency and the position of labour, and the literature on the Ethiopian labour movement.

1.6 Structure

This first chapter consists of a general introduction to the study. The aim is to set the stage for the study that follows.

In the second chapter two important tasks are addressed. The first consists of reviewing the literature pertaining to the theoretical field. Here, conceptualisations and relevant theoretical discussions are fleshed out and assessed. The second task consists of reviewing and assessing the literature on the concrete subject area: that of the Ethiopian labour movement. Discussions on the conditions and position of Ethiopian wage workers are also addressed here.

The third chapter aims to set the context of the specific inquiry. First, this entails a discussion of the social and historical context. The second part of this chapter, aims to zoom in on the problem of economic surpluses – their production, distribution and appropriation – and how this relates to the evolving labour regime. This part includes a discussion on the changing legal regime and the conditions of labour. Finally, the processes of development of the manufacturing sector of Ethiopia – including the ambitions placed onto it, and the strategies and plans meant to achieve those ambitions – and of the wage working population are discussed. This enables a contextualisation of wage labour within the broader political economy and labour regime – the structural contexts in which its movement takes place, and the structural setting that it aims to affect.

As noted, the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters can be thought of as the core of the dissertation. The fourth chapter describes and analyses the first cycle of growth and decrease in assertiveness; of advance and retreat, ranging from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, and its aftermath. This chapter includes a discussion on the formation of the labour movement, before attention is shifted to the process that produced a groundswell of militant energies, and the eventual reversal of this process. Factors that were conducive to the growth of assertiveness and factors that constrained this assertiveness are fleshed out. The fifth chapter discusses a second cycle of growth and decrease in assertiveness in a similar manner. Chronologically, this chapter covers the period from the late

1980s to mid-1990s. Here too, the process is described before conducive and constraining factors are examined.

The sixth chapter is concerned with mapping historical levels of unrest and real wages over the full period of both cycles. The two variables are first measured separately, before a discussion on their relation is conducted. This chapter also examines the two case studies: the Bahir Dar Textile Factory and the Ethio-Djibouti Railway.

In chapter seven, the discussion of the previous chapters are brought together and findings are discussed. Determinants of the shifting orientation of the labour movement are fleshed out, as are its effects. This sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between the orientation and position of labour. Finally, the implications of the findings for the context-specific and the theoretically oriented literature are discussed.

1.7 Point of departure

My own interest in understanding the Ethiopian labour movement follows from a couple of factors. On the one hand, having spent part of my formative years and education in and on Ethiopia had made me appreciative of the social and historical terrain and instilled in me an interest in understanding it. Secondly, my experiences as an organised member of the Swedish labour movement and the political left, and the ideational imprint of those experiences, has generated an interest in the struggles of wage workers. My interest in the Ethiopian labour movement in general, and its assertive phases in particular follows from this. This having been stated, it ought to be noted that my normative position going into this research project was that organised labour on an assertive footing is a positive thing in itself, and that demands for a greater share of surpluses from labour, whenever such demands are articulated, are – per definition – justified.

With regards then to my positioning within the field/s of social sciences and history, my early engagement with Marxist literature has left a strong impression on me. First, this has meant that the separation between social scientific disciplines and between those disciplines and history has always appeared artificial and alien. The novelty of multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches and the necessity to stress the merits of such approaches has therefore escaped me. Instead, I find my views more resonant with what Wallerstein (2008) called the Historical Social Science, which is based on a rejection of the intellectual relevance of disciplinary borders within

and among the social sciences and history altogether. This being a dissertation produced under the joint supervision of two universities, within two different disciplines – those of History and African Studies – I believe that this approach to social scientific and historical scholarship is not only most convincing, but also most suitable for the project at hand.

A second, and related, manner in which my engagement with Marxism has imprinted itself is in terms of an attention to the material grounding of social phenomena. That approach which most strongly emphasises this aspect is Historical Materialism. But in order to avoid conflation with some of the cruder characterisations of this approach, and some of the caricatures of it, it is probably necessary to spell out precisely what is meant by the term within this research project. The idea that historical materialism consists of merely an analytical reduction to the economic level is a crude simplification. Rather, as Blackledge (2006: 22) has explained, it is the process of production 'understood as a social, political and historical process' that is at the centre of historical materialist analysis. Historical materialism then constitutes 'a rejection of the reification of the concepts of the economic, the political and the sociological' as independent levels susceptible to analytical separation (Blackledge 2006: 22). Yet, the insistence on the analytical primacy of the social process of production – which includes the distribution and appropriation of the social produce – is the foundation for a materialist conception and analysis of history. In the sense that the concern here is with categories rooted in the process of production and that the notion of struggle over surpluses originating from social production – which constitutes both the logic for labour organisation and an aspect of the outcome of the movement of labour – shoots through this research project, it can be stated that the project is placed within the historical materialist tradition.

Historical materialism, much as radical and critical history in general, is, despite its name, future- and change-oriented. In the historical materialist tradition, this commitment is made most explicit in Marx's claim that the point is to change the world, rather than merely interpreting it. But more generally, it has been stated about history that its sword 'has two edges'; one which 'cuts through the noise, contradictions, and lies of the past', but another one 'that cuts open new possibilities in the future' (Guldi and Armstrong 2014: 13). The nature of this exercise, then, despite reaching into the past, is not purely historical. Rather, by looking back, the aim is to analyse the present conjuncture in a critical manner, the relations, dynamics and trajectories that explain the coming of this conjuncture and are likely to stretch into the future, with a mind towards identifying the

possibilities of future transformations. The commitment to change can be expressed in a desire to interrogate and potentially destabilise inherited knowledge. Such knowledge, in this case, may express itself in perceptions of an unchanging timidity of Ethiopian workers and an equally unchanging docility of their movement, about a mechanic determination of wages as outcomes of productivity, or about the illegitimacy of labour unrest and militancy. In all cases, attention to the past may hold the keys to describing variations over time, explaining such variances in a more multifaceted manner, and thus point to the alternative paths potentially open.

Another concern relates to the geographical boundaries of this inquiry. Within the field of labour history, the prevalence methodological nationalism has been criticised. Van der Linden and Roth (2014:13-14) have claimed that methodological nationalists treat nation-states as natural entities with trans-historic qualities and conflate society with the state. This critique is certainly both valid and warranted. As the subject of this study is defined by state-territorial boundaries – although conditioning processes certainly are not – a justification may be prudent in light of this critique. Although no contention can be made about the potential drawbacks of methodological nationalism, state boundaries cannot be ignored. Within the contours of states – however transitory they are – political-economic processes are conditioned, advanced and sometimes curtailed or halted. Some phenomena actually begin or end precisely where a territorial border appears. With regards to certain aspects of labour movements this frequently tends to be the case, not the least in the manner in which those movements define themselves. While, in this dissertation, it is considered how transnational processes helped create and shaped the Ethiopian labour movement, it is nonetheless a fact that this movement emerged within, and was defined by, the contours of the Ethiopian political economy and polity.

Something similar can be said about the focus on wage labour. Indeed, recent labour history has moved in the direction of recognising the importance of a plethora of different labour relations, and away from a preferential focus on wage labour. Here too, the intention is not to advocate the analytical centrality of one form of labour relations. The focus on wage labour, in this case, is the result of contextual considerations. Wage labourers were the first workers to organise in Ethiopia on a mass-scale, and it was subsequently wage labouring sectors that were opened to legal organisation. As a natural result, wage labourers have played the most prominent role in the Ethiopian labour movement. This is not to deny that non-wage labourers have organised in

important movements of their own. Recurrent peasant movements are prime examples of this[15]. Neither is it to deny that non-wage labourers have been participants in the labour movement and may have an important role to play in the future. However, it can safely be asserted that while the movements of Ethiopian peasants have been the subject of extensive academic interest, the movement of Ethiopian wage workers has not.

1.8 Research process, evolution and revisions

The design of this research has been revised since its inception in order to overcome both limitations of the initial design of the project and obstacles of more practical nature. Initially, this project was conceived of as locating the dynamics that determine orientation exclusively *within the formal structures of the trade unions*. This scope has since been broadened in two ways. First, I have found it problematic to focus on the formal structures of trade unions alone. This is because in due course of the research, I found that key actors and processes that operate within the trade unions often simultaneously operate across and outside these formal boundaries. This is especially so with regards to contestation and in times where such contestation is high: key phenomenon and conjunctures for this research, in other words. As noted, legal restrictions on the right to strike has meant that strike action has consistently had to be organised outside the formal sphere of the trade unions. It seems reductionist and highly formalistic, in a dynamic context where processes and actors span across the formal boundaries of the unions, and where some of the defining practices are, at the very least in the formal sense, external to the unions, to excessively focus on such formal boundaries, especially in times when they lose much of their significance. This is the reason for shifting the scope of this research, from a narrow focus on trade unions alone, to a broader view of the labour movement of which they are part. It should, however, be noted that as trade unions occupy a central position within the labour movement, they remain central in this research.

When it comes to the shift of focus from the internal dynamics of the trade unions to broader social dynamics – internal and external – of which the labour movement is subject to, and the reciprocal interplay between cause and effect, there are three justifications. The first relates to the point mentioned above. The internal dynamics would again have been confined to the formal boundaries of the trade union, and would have similarly failed to capture important dynamics that cuts across, or operates outside of, those formal boundaries. A second justification has to do with the tentative

[15] See, for example, Gebru (1996)

findings. In due course of the research I found indications that that periods of unrest and heightened labour assertiveness have been linked with periods of rising real wages and vice versa – that the more assertive phases of labour movement seemed to go together with important positive change in the position of labour, while those changes only seemed to increase the assertiveness of labour rather than to reduce it. A similar reciprocal interplay seemed to prevail in periods of significant worsening of the conditions and position of labour, which counter-intuitively did not seem to spark any assertive reaction. This led me to ponder over the direction of cause and effect, the degree to which the changing position of labour imprinted itself on the orientation of the labour movement and vice versa, and the degree to which the process of establishing orientation of the labour movement is conditioned by the perceived success of prior strategies. It seemed increasingly difficult to separate these two aspects, and while examining how the labour movement affected the position of labour and vice versa, I became increasingly convinced that they were in fact too closely interrelated to be analytically separated – that the causes can probably never be entirely distinguished from the effects. This notion features importantly in what follows. A third reason for broadening the scope from the internal dynamics alone was pragmatic: in due course of the research it became apparent that local union archives were rare, limited in scope, and generally only reached back to the immediate past. While central trade union archives were available, and thoroughly consulted, the original structure of the research was premised on the availability of a rich amount of local workplace trade union archives. When this proved a problematic proposition, it also undermined the viability of a narrowly conceived research project that focused on one aspect of dynamics of assertiveness alone. All in all, this is probably not a drawback, since, in the manner explained above, a broadening of scope is indeed both analytically defensible and prudent. From the original design, it is argued that it remains conducive not to singularly focus on, and thereby reduce dynamics to, one-dimensional state-union relations alone, as the tendency has been in the past. However, it is simultaneously argued that another form of reductionism – reducing the dynamics in which orientation is established to the internal relations of trade unions alone – would be just as problematic.

Over the course of this research, prolonged periods have been spent in the archives of the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions, the Ethiopian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Bahir Dar Textile Factory, the Dire Dawa railway office, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions hosted at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, the

International Labour Organisation in Geneva, and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. In addition to this, research stays at a number of libraries have been conducted. These include the libraries of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency in Addis Ababa, the School of Oriental and Asian Studies in London, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam and the African Studies Centre in Leiden. Meanwhile, a number of in-depth interviews with key participants have been held. These interviews have taken place in Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, Kampala, Geneva, Amsterdam, and over the internet.

1.9 Definitions, assumptions and propositions

The primary subject of this study is the Ethiopian labour movement. A *labour movement* can be considered to include two things. First it includes all those organisational constellations based on membership of workers operating with the explicit aim of advancing the position of the workers. Second, it includes all those collective practices undertaken by workers – formally organised or not – that aims to affect change of this position, whether on a local, national or international level. To the extent that the category includes the practices of workers, it must also be considered to include an ideational aspect: the aims, strategies and methods deemed most prudent and therefore adopted in the collective effort, or, put in another way, their orientation. Essentially, this describes the dialectical unity of ideas and practice in the category of *praxis*.

A central component of labour movements is the organisations that are established in order to increase the collective leverage of the workers. This form of organisation goes under different names, but is most frequently referred to as *trade unions*. As is discussed in the following chapter, functional definitions that restrict and limit the legitimate areas of activity of unions ought to be avoided. In this dissertation, a broader conception of trade unions is upheld. Hyman (1975:64-65) defines trade unions in the following manner:

> *A trade union is, first and foremost, an agency and a medium of power. Its central purpose is to permit workers to exert, collectively, the control over their conditions of employment which they cannot hope to possess as individuals; and to do so largely by compelling the employer to take account, in policy- and decision-making, of interests and priorities contrary to his own. As the vehicle of workers' interests against those of the employer, the union is involved in external relationships of control. (Such relationships are essentially two-way; as unions seek to affect the decisions of employers and governments they are themselves subject to influence and pressure from a range of external agencies.) But at the same time, process of control pervade the internal relationships of the unions.*

This makes a good starting point for a broad conceptualisation of trade unionism, but it is subject to a slight modification here. The term 'conditions of employment' seems excessively restrictive in terms of scope of control. Beatrice and Sidney Webb (1920: 1) made this point when they changed the definition of trade unionism between the first and second edition of their hugely influential work *The History of Trade Unionism*. While the first definition had referred to 'maintaining and improving the condition of their *employment*', the second edition, in response to criticism raised on the grounds mentioned above, instead referred to *working lives* – a significantly broader term. Allowing for such a broader conceptualisation that takes into account the dualism of trade unionism, it is here defined as *a collective organisation of workers that serves as an agency and a medium of power that permit workers to exert collective control as well as an agency and medium of power that permit the exercise of control over workers*.

The category of *workers* is conceived of inclusively but context-specific, as comprising all non-managerial employees working for a wage[16]. *Labour unrest* is likewise conceived broadly[17] as including all those practical expressions that workers' disaffection may take, including foot-dragging, unpermitted absence, indiscipline and petitioning, but also sabotage, destruction of property and organised strikes.

Assertiveness is taken to mean the readiness of workers and representatives to act, in the face of probable opposition, to exert pressure on external entities – through a range of means and practices, in both the industrial and the broader socio-political sphere – in order to improve conditions, to maximise work- and wage-related concessions, to gain influence over broader political-economic processes, and to achieve structural aims[18]. In this sense it is intimately related to *militancy*, which accentuates the adversarial and confrontational aspects of workers' practices. It is militant practices and assertive strategies that animates the movement, and breathes life into structures that, in their absence, risk fossilising and succumbing to bureaucratisation. Ample research has demonstrated the stultifying effects of, and the self-serving interests that is generated by, such bureaucratisation,

[16] This is not to suggest that only wage workers are workers, but only to avoid repetitious mention of *wage* workers.
[17] See Scott (1985) for a discussion on the basis of including such 'lesser' expressions of resistance.
[18] The pursuit of *structurally* and qualitatively transformative aims is juxtaposed with that of a quantitative – and as the evidence seems to suggest, in the long-term absence of social structural change, futile – strategy of singularly pursuing incremental income redistribution based on collective bargaining (Allen 1967: 242-244). Structural change, according to Allen (1967: 148), refers to the transfer of economic decision-making powers.

but also the manner in, and conditions under which, labour movements burst to life again under new bouts of militancy and re-gain an offensive footing. Assertiveness, finally, is not just studied as a phenomenon important in its own right, but it has repeatedly been posited that such it is conducive to improvements in the conditions and position of labour.

The usage of the term *labour regime* here is slightly different from its usage in much of the literature. The term has been used to describe a number of different phenomena. On the one hand, it has been used to refer to the rules that determine the mobilisation/recruitment of labour and the organisation of the labour process (Ciccia 2015; Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015). In this dissertation, however, the term is treated as a political-economic category as much as a sociological one. That is, as a category as much relevant to the analysis of the production, distribution and appropriation of surpluses as with the organisation of the labour process. The difference here can be understood as one between what Burawoy (1985: 13-14) has described as the relations *in* production and the relations *of* production. While the former refers to the organisation of tasks, the latter include both the appropriation and distribution of surpluses. Reflecting this way of conceptualising the term, Bortz (2008: 16-17) has written that 'the labour regime is the set of relationships, organisations, and institutions that define the appropriation of labour and its products, the parameters of the workplace rules, concepts, and behaviours'. In a slightly different manner, the term has been treated as synonymous with the mode or mechanism of surplus extraction from labour[19], through wage or non-wage mechanisms. Such a conceptualisation is strikingly narrow and does not significantly differ from the concept of *mode of exploitation* – or, to be more precise, that component of the mode of exploitation constituted by the *mechanism/technique of exploitation*[20]. Since the *degree* of exploitation/surplus extraction may likely, for the individual worker as well as for the analyst of the broader political-economic configuration, appear just as important as the mode, it can be argued that any conceptualisation that does not include this aspect is inherently limited. Something similar can be stated of the conditions and rights of labour. A broadest conceptualisation of labour regime would have it refer to the configuration of the full set of labour relations in play. While this is certainly the most conducive way of thinking of it in the abstract, its operationalisation becomes a difficult

[19] See, for instance, Brass (2011).
[20] The techniques of exploitation have been defined as 'the precise instrumentalities through which economic surplus is pumped out of the direct producers' (Ruyle 1975).

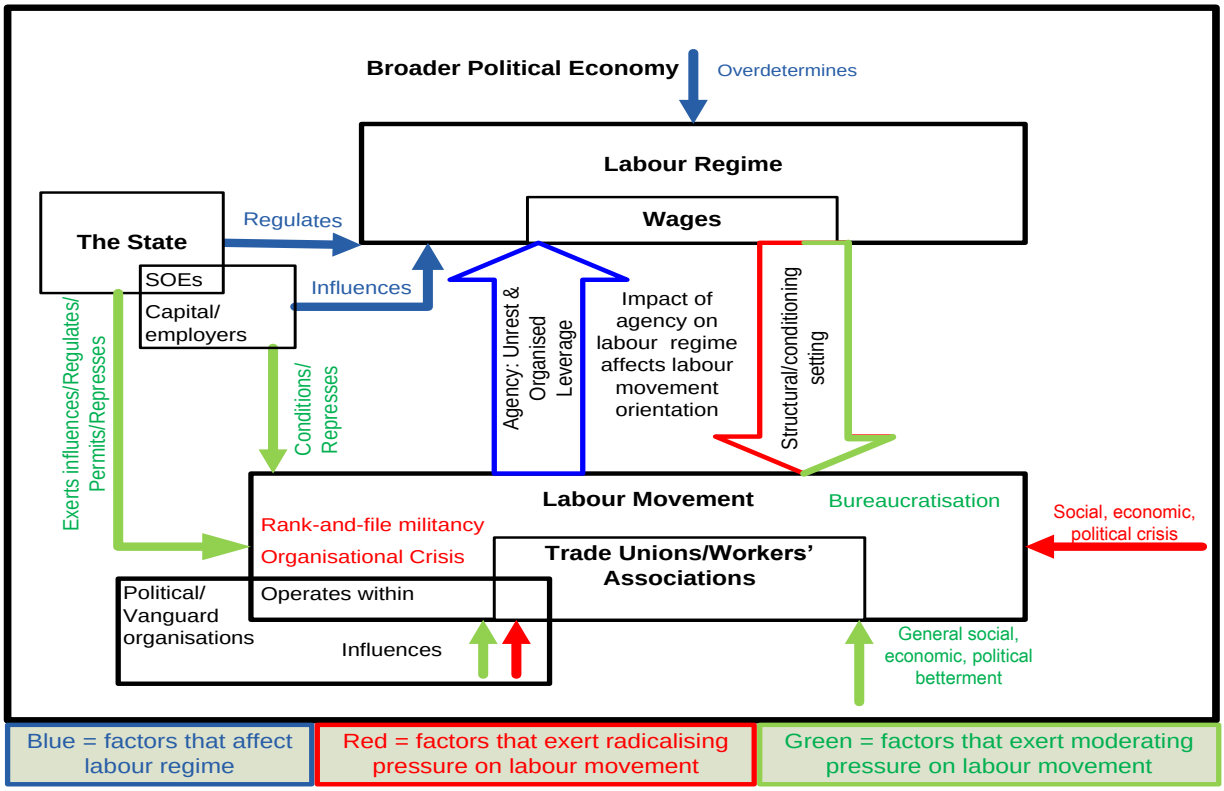
proposition. In this dissertation a broad but yet delimited conceptualisation of the category of labour regime is employed. It is conceived of as subsuming three variables: the conditions of labour, including the collective rights of labour; the mode of surplus extraction from labour, pertaining to wage or non-wage mechanisms; and the degree of surplus extraction, indicating the level of remuneration. Labour regimes, viewed in this broad manner, are in perpetual motion and change over time in reaction to a number of variables.

The degree of leverage that labour exerts, the rights it enjoys, the conditions of labour and the degree to which value created is compensated can be said to define *the position of labour*. This position is simultaneously a structural quality of the political-economic configuration and the result of agency exercised in past contestations and struggles. Since it is deeply interlinked with the character of the labour regime, a change in the labour regime is likely to imply a change in the position of labour and vice versa.

A key assumption that underlies this research is that the impact of the labour movement cannot readily be separated from factors that determine the orientation of the movement. This is so because the labour regime, as defined here, is simultaneously subject to pressure from the movement and a force that conditions it. It is also so because the effects of labour movement become a central factor in the future orientation of the movement: a strategy of confrontation appears appealing when it has resulted in desirable changes, and the opposite is equally true.

An analytical sketch, illustrating the principal factors that determine the relationship between the strategic orientation of the labour movement and the position of labour – as are identified in the literature, and which are covered in more detail in the following chapter – is presented below.

Analytical sketch



1.10 Scientific importance and impact

The justification for this project can be found on three levels. Most immediately, the research generates knowledge on the dynamics that determine the orientation of the Ethiopian labour movements, and how, in turn, it is linked to the broader development of the labour regime. Such knowledge contributes towards filling the conspicuous knowledge gaps on what is arguably one of the most important social forces in the country. The importance of the labour movement in Ethiopia stem from a number of factors. Size is one. For even if the Ethiopian labour movement has been derided as miniscule (Dessalegn 2002: 114), such a characterisation can only stem from a crude comparison with an 'ideal' state of organised labour derived from specific historical conjunctures in industrial economies. For with a membership numbering in the hundreds of thousands and growing (Assefa, 2003: 27-28; ILO 2013), the labour movement is a rare example of a mass-based organisation, unsurpassed in size in contemporary Ethiopia. Potential is another factor, for whenever the labour movement has broken with the control regime imposed by the state, it has been able to play an important role on a country-wide level. There are theoretical explanations, accounted for in the below, for the powerful potential of labour movements in general, and in African contexts in particular. However, for the Ethiopian labour movement to be

able to exercise its potential weight, a certain level of assertiveness and autonomy is required. This research contributes to enhancing our understanding of the conditions under which assertiveness and autonomy can be acquired.

On another level, the knowledge generated by this research goes some way towards contextualising general debates on labour movement and trade union dynamics in African settings, and provides some new insights on aspects of such dynamics. The debate on the relationship between labour bureaucracy and rank-and-file membership in determining strategic orientation, for example, has largely been conducted with examples from industrial economies. Analysing such dynamics in an alternative setting has the potential of revealing features that not only enrichen, but potentially alter, our understanding of them. The explicitly political side of labour and trade union movementism in Africa, and the regime of control that states frequently attempt to impose over unions, furthermore, has often simply been registered or assumed. This research goes some way towards revealing the dynamics and factors that explain politicisation of African labour movements and the conditions under which they may gain autonomy.

Moreover, the research project sheds light on a phenomenon that is often neglected in discussions on African labour movements: the agency of workers in shaping the labour regime under which they work, organise and struggle. Wage levels and working conditions are far too often simply taken as given, or viewed as the mechanical outcomes of contextual factors alone. Here, the impact of workers' agency – in the form of organisation and unrest – on wage levels and labour regime changes is brought to the forefront. To this end, the research presented here provides a historical account of how the present Ethiopian labour regime has evolved, and insights into how it may be changed.

Finally, the research brings an aspect of reciprocal determination to the fore that is hitherto under-theorised. This is the interplay between causes and effects – how the effects of the orientation of the labour movement on the position of labour is reciprocated, in the impact of those changes, on the orientation of the labour movement. Testing this proposition constitutes what is potentially the theoretically novel aspect of this research.

2. Theoretical considerations and assessment of the literature

2.1 Conceptualising labour movements

In the previous chapter the key concepts that are used in this research were discussed and defined. Labour movements, it is to be recalled, were said to include two aspects. The first aspect was institutional, while the second referred to activities: movements as organised collectives and movements as sets of practices. There is a certain tension between these two aspects, but there is also a complementary logic to the two aspects. Van der Linden (2008: 179) has observed that while 'unions cannot exist without (the ultimate threat of) the strike weapon, the converse is not true'. However, even if unrest, including strikes, often take place in the absence of unions, some form of organised constellations are eventually required in order articulate demands, coordinate efforts, negotiate agreements, and safeguard them. This must not necessarily take the form of a trade union, but in the absence of any organised constellations, it is unlikely that durable concessions can be extracted.

The tension and complementarities between the two aspects of labour movements is reflected in the literature. The literature on social movements, for example, has grappled with the relation between movement and organisation. To a certain extent, labour movements operate within the fields covered by both social movement theory and organisational theory. As a social movement, a labour movements can be considered a 'process aimed at challenging and destabilising established organisations and/or institutions', to the extent that these institutions generally reflect the interests of employers over labour. Organisationally, labour movements include 'formal units governed by institutionalised authority' (Davis et al. 2005: 2). But a labour movement is a specific and particular form of social movement, and trade unions constitute a particular form of organisations that are not only subject to the general logics of social movements and organisations, but to specific dynamics. These particular forms of movements and organisations, furthermore, have generated an extensive field of specialised literature quite distinguishable from that of social movement and organisational theory. As this literature is more specific to the type of movement that is the subject of this study, and to the particular problematic that is the concern here – that of the causes and effects of shifting orientation of labour movements – it is deemed appropriate to focus on this particular strand of literature.

The literature on labour movements, however, is generally split between the two aspects identified above – theoretical literature on trade unions and on labour unrest is often somewhat disjointed. For this reason the exposition that follows is separated into sections discussing the literature on the two aspects of the labour movement, and includes discussion of causes and effects of shifting orientation. That does not mean that labour organisations and practices should be thought of as separate – in fact the opposite is probably true. In many cases, to be sure, it is organisational constellations themselves – or at the very least actors within such constellations – that are directly responsible for organising or coordinating the practices, and in other cases the practices result in the emergence of such constellations. Neither is it meant to imply that there are no overlaps in the literature, or accounts that treats the subject in a more unified manner. However, in light of how the predominant part of the literature in the field is currently structured, this is thought of as a pragmatic manner in which to structure this initial engagement with the field.

2.2 Dynamics of organised labour

2.2.1 Functions

Theorisation on organised labour has, for historical reasons, predominantly been based on experience in Europe and North America. It was in these regions that the first batch of trade union and labour movements developed, in close historical connection to the development of industrial capitalism. The social, political and economic context of the emergence of labour movements not only shaped the commonalities that we now associate with the term, but also the variances between them. The essential features of labour movements can thus be distinguished from its particular forms only by taking these contexts into account.

The labour movement in Europe came to develop into mass forces at a time of heightened social contradictions. The trade union movement developed in symbiosis with the explicitly political side of the labour movement in a context of militant activity and radicalism. Legal and workplace recognition often had to be fought for and unions were deeply involved in the struggle for wider political and social rights, some of which are now intimately associated with bourgeois democracy, but visions of radically restructuring the capitalist economy served as an important aspect of organised labour too. Through the twentieth century, however, militancy and radicalism generally and gradually gave way to moderation of policies and practices. Meanwhile, different contexts, often national in character, triggered differences in strategic choices and outlook of union

leaderships. *Business unionism* – a type of unionism which is functionally limited to economic struggle – has frequently been counterpoised with *political unionism*, or *revolutionary unionism* at the other end of the continuum (Hyman 2001; Lipset 1969: 389-392). Practices of West European unions have frequently tended to fall somewhere in between, within the broad outlines of what Hyman (2001) terms *political economism*, but there is a scholarly recognition of union radicalism that goes beyond the confines of economistic[21] aims. One recent discussion on such phenomena is that on contemporary *radical political unionism* - a term referring to a type of unionism that combines militant action with explicitly left-wing political goals (Upchurch and Mathers 2011; Connolly and Darlington 2012; Gordon and Upchurch 2012).

As much of this taxonomic discussion pertains to what is perceived as the 'legitimate' functions and purposes of trade unions, it is unavoidable that it tends to be biased by normative factors and political preferences. To conceptualise organised labour in a manner that can serve analytical rather than normative and political purposes, it is therefore necessary to look at the actual history of practices of trade unions. From a brief review of the literature, it is clear that collective bargaining over wage and working conditions is generally accepted as taking a place of central importance (Allen 1954: 15; 1960: 241; Webb and Webb 1920). Such bargaining includes, but is not confined to, issues of wages and working conditions. It also frequently include areas of control over the processes of work, an area of potentially very high stakes (Mann 1973). Where bargaining is not deemed possible, desirable or where it fails, it falls upon trade unions to organise industrial action. As according to the reference to van der Linden (2008: 179) above, the strike threat is the ultimate foundation of unions, in the absence of which irrelevance is all but guaranteed. Although definitions of trade unions have been drawn from the central location of the efforts to improve wages and working conditions (Allen 1954: 15), it would be premature to limit trade unionism to this set of functions, for even the most 'business'-oriented unions are forced in one way or another to engage with the broader forces that shape the meaning and outcome of collective bargaining.

At the very minimum, 'unions engage in politics most directly by intervening in political processes and institutions that regulate and control labour relations and the price of labour', such as 'labour legislation, labour courts, [and] government labour departments' (Beckman and Sachikonye 2010: 3). Equally, unions must engage in areas that pertain to the social wage in totality, as opposed to

[21] *Economism* refers to the singular pursuit of better terms for the sale of labour (Clements 1978: 318).

the relative nominal wage alone, because 'conditions of work are fundamentally affected by the supply of reasonably priced water, energy, transport etc., [and] value of wages depends on price-levels, health care, education [and] social policies' (Beckman and Sachikonye 2010: 3). This also calls attention to the importance of measuring and bargaining over real wages, adjusted for inflation, as opposed to nominal wages, which have little independent value.

It follows from these points that 'in contemporary industrial relations, the state cannot escape a central and visible position' (Hyman 1975: 120). But the state does not take on the character of an independent and neutral interlocutor, for in a capitalist context the state facilitates, 'through a variety of institutional arrangements... the routine exploitation of wage-labour by capital; and on rare occasions when the routine [is] seriously disrupted, [it intervenes] brutally and decisively' (Hyman 1975: 136). 'The ostensibly neutral functions of mediation and conciliation' Hyman (1975: 136) has written, 'in fact serve the essential purpose, for both employers and the state, of stabilising the existing mode of production'. What strategies the state employs to achieve these aims vary according to context. Restrictions in the rights to unionise and to take industrial action remain important prerogatives of most states, and sanctions and/or repression are regularly deployed when unions fail to respect the parameters of permissible practices. But in general, a degree of accommodation and legal recognition is preferable to outright criminalisation, if only to reduce militancy and the economic disruptions resultant from industrial contestation, and to enable control and co-option mechanisms to be deployed (Hyman 1975: 140-143).

The state, to be sure, does not only relate to organised labour as an external source of influence and pressure, but also as an object of contention. Unions have often proclaimed radical socially transformative aims which relate not only to state policy – in terms of questions of ownership, control and distribution – but to the very nature of state power itself (Hyman 1975: 87; Webb and Webb 1920: 1). While on a basic level, the political nature of organised labour emanate from the fact that 'all industrial action is "political" in the sense that it involves struggle, conflict and power relations' (Hain 1986: 20)[22], it is the pursuit of aims of the type mentioned above that imbues it with an explicitly political character. Attempts to restrict the legitimate aims and practices of

[22] Or, bluntly put, from the 'truism' that the class struggle is always political (Cohen 2006: 172-173). 'Objectively', Cohen (2006: 175) writes, 'working-class resistance challenges the rule of capital, and prevents it imposing its agenda in the unfettered way that it would like'. Put in this way, the political side of even the most economistic unionism is apparent.

unionism – whether legally or scholarly – serves the interests of counterparts that do not wish to see the established patterns of power, ownership and control upset, and thus carry political connotations in themselves. A narrowly confined conception of unionism that excludes the pursuit of explicitly political and radical aims must therefore be rejected.

2.2.2 Establishing orientation

The literature has identified pressures from a number of factors that discourage unions from adopting a radical assertive outlook. These pressures emanate from internal as well as external sources. Whether framed as a process of maturation or of bureaucratisation, the institutionalisation of unionism has been found to tend to entail a moderation of aims and a waning of militant practices. Viewed as a process of *maturation*, this results from an increasing conviction among union officials that benefits can accrue to all parties through a peaceful and moderated process of bargaining, leading to a decline in militant activity (Lester 1958). Efficiency in achieving desirable outcomes is here counter-posed to internal democracy as union officialdom becomes 'guardians of organisational efficiency' that take a strategic view which the membership is deemed unable to do (Hyman 1975: 74). The professionalisation of the officialdom permits it to develop a degree of specialised knowledge deemed unattainable to the mass membership. This separation is reinforced by the development of political skills and a level of control over the organisational machinery that allows the officialdom to fortify its position to a degree where tenure becomes near-permanent. In this process, the mass membership's response is characterised by lethargy, combined with trust in the specialised skills and awe of the status of the officialdom (Lipset 1969) – Michel's (1915) 'iron law of oligarchy' operates in full swing.

But this process of moderation has also been discussed in terms of *bureaucratisation*. In engaging in collective bargaining, unionism develops a dual character which casts the union official as not only an agent of workers' interests, but also an agent of control over workers: a 'manager of discontent' (Mills 1948: 8-9). Since collective bargaining only is effective to the extent that concerted action is possible and agreements are adhered to, enforcing workers' adherence to established agreements and minimising unauthorised industrial action become important concerns for union officials (Hyman 1975: 65) – 'it is only through the power *over* its members which is vested in the trade union that it is able to exert power *for* them', as Hyman (1975: 64) eloquently puts it. Within this context of hierarchic and functional separation of officials from the rank-and-

file, the process of bureaucratisation is reinforced by factors that materially and socially separate the union officials from the rank-and-file, and vest the former with a strong interest in preserving industrial peace and legality[23]. The labour bureaucracy comes to compose 'a distinct social layer that is neither proletarian nor capitalist, but lies in socioeconomic and political terms between the employers and employees' (Brenner 2010: 41). This layer has, through the unions, escaped 'the miseries of work under the aegis of capital in the factory' (Brenner 2010: 41), acquired for itself a source of income often incommensurate with that of the rank-and-file, and advanced in terms of social standing. It thus occupies a privileged socio-economic position separate from that of the rank-and-file that it is loath to surrender. But in safeguarding this position, every confrontation with the employer or the state becomes an undesirably risky proposition for the labour bureaucracy. Its material and social conditions are better guarded by the establishment and preservation of amicable and peaceful industrial relations. The preservation of tranquillity at all costs is frequently framed in terms of 'institutional needs' – a requirement for preserving the movement, strengthening it, and/or defending its achievements – and the defence of the organisation is often conflated with and superordinated to the defence of the interests of the membership (Brenner 2010: 41). Yet, institutional needs, as defined by a particular layer of officialdom, cannot be taken at face value. For not only might the material and social separation of the officialdom from the rank-and-file give rise to divergence of interests, but it is moreover precisely at the higher organisational levels that external pressures are focused.

External moderating pressures emanate principally from employers and the state. Such pressures entail both the promise of rewards – in terms of recognition and accommodation – and the threat of punishments – up to and including full assault on and potential destruction of the trade union movement[24] (van der Linden 2008: 239-241). Where outright suppression is not attempted, the goals of such carrot-and-stick policies are to define and subvert goals (Hyman 1975: 67). Internal

[23]A caveat is required here. While bureaucratisation entails the process of functional, material and social separation of the layer of officialdom, it is for Hyman (2012: 156) meaningful essentially as 'a social relation as well as in terms of a stratum of personnel'. Darlington and Upchurch (2012) summarise this conception by stating that '"bureaucracy" within trade unionism is comprised of three sets of social relations: a separation of representation from mobilisation, a hierarchy of control and activism, and the detachment of formal mechanisms of policy and decision-making from the experience of members'. This is contrasted with 'the term "trade union bureaucracy"', which 'can be taken to refer more specifically to FTOs who are the paid professional functionaries of unions and act as specialist representatives of the broader membership'.

[24] For the leadership, the rewards of collaboration and moderation would be enhanced by potential career opportunities, and threats would be aggravated by the spectre of personal accountability for any union activity deemed illicit.

relations of control are thus interacting with external relations of control in the nexus described by Hyman in the above[25].

While moderation is seen as emanating from this interaction between internal and external pressures, militancy, where applicable, has been viewed as originating in pressures from the rank-and-file (Brenner 2010; Cohen 2006). This would imply that there generally is a co-relation between more democratic intra-union relations and greater union militancy (Herding 1978: 269-272). 'It is the exploitative social relations at the heart of capitalist society', Darlington and Upchurch (2012: 88) argue 'to which the mass of rank-and-file union members are subject that provides the material basis for collective workers´ struggles which distinguish them from [full-time officials]'[26]. The disposition of the rank-and-file here becomes of key importance.

In Marxist theory, trade unions, workplace struggles and strike activity serve to radicalise and make the rank-and-file conscious of antagonistic class contradictions – as 'schools of war' (Engels 2009; Lenin 1964) readying the workers for explicitly political struggles. This is not meant to imply that such activity alone will be sufficient to do so. In Leninist theory, moderate and economistic *trade union consciousness* requires the intervention of an organised vanguard force among the workers to give way to explicitly political and revolutionary consciousness (Lenin 1970). The logic of political vanguardism has eloquently been explained by Anderson (1967: 265): while trade unions by themselves 'take on the natural hue of the closed, capital-dominated environment of the factory itself' and thus become a 'passive reflection of the organisation of the workforce', it is only the vanguardist party - 'a voluntarist contractual collective' - that can effect a rupture with this environment and restructure the social contours that unions adhere to. The vanguard party requires – at minimum – the uptake of parts of the intelligentsia, who share no obvious material interests with the working class, but whose allegiance has been created by the work of the political vanguard '*against the grain of the social structure'*. In this manner, Perry

[25] See citation on page 18.

[26] This, however, does not mean that degrees of militancy is a direct function of degrees of exploitation. Ideational aspect and awareness of relative conditions are key mediating factors here. Levels of education are frequently higher at the upper levels of the pay scale, potentially offsetting, but also possibly reinforcing, the moderating effect of a relatively higher pay – as is the awareness that key skills required for white-collar jobs entail a higher degree of leverage. Partly as a result, Coates (1967:77) notes that 'the most militant and aggressive section of the trade union movement in almost every advanced country are the better paid ones'.

Anderson writes, a 'political party alone can incarnate a true negation of existing society' – '*it alone is negativity in history*'.

While other Marxist theoreticians have expressed more confidence in the prospects of trade unions operating relatively autonomously – albeit in reciprocity with broader political movements – to overcome narrow economism (Luxemburg 1986), it is generally agreed that in times of contextual social and political-economic stability and in the absence of internal crises, the pressure from rank-and-file militancy is usually containable (Hyman 2012: 157; Lipset 1969). This, however, calls to attention the crucial importance of taking into consideration not only the construction of political attitudes among workers, but also the social, political and economic environmental factors in which labour movements operate.

To sum up, in broad strokes, two central factors can be seen as pressuring organised labour towards moderation of aims and practices[27]: the internal process of maturation/bureaucratisation interacting with external pressures from employers and the state directed principally towards the higher levels of the union organisation. Against these pressures three forces have been identified that may push the movement in the opposite direction: rank-and-file militancy; the operation within the movement of a political vanguard; and the prevalence of social, political, economic and/or organisational instability. This is not to say that the mentioned factors determine the outcome in a conclusive or mechanical manner, but only that they may be useful in analysing the dynamics of the process of radicalisation/moderation within its full context. In the end, unions are mass-based organisations, and however influenced, constrained or spurred by these factor and the context in which they operate, it is the *praxis*[28] of the mass membership that must serve as the focal point of analysis.

2.3 Practices: labour unrest

According to Silver (2003: 184), labour unrest consists of 'resistance by human beings to being turned into and/or treated as commodities'. Its origin thus lies in the same capitalist-generated dynamics that gives rise to trade unionism. Central forms of labour unrest consists of the overt acts in which the workers 'openly declare that their purpose is to challenge and/or contain exploitation' (Silver 2003: 184). These include strikes, boycotts, riots and demonstrations. They constitute the

[27] See sketch in the previous chapter for an illustration of these forces.
[28] *Praxis* refers to the dialectical unity of consciousness and action.

actions most readily recognisable as labour unrest, which most scholarly studies have focused on. Indeed, strikes have aptly been described as 'representing the most direct and unmediated action of workers collectively' (Waterman 1976: 331). But important as they may be, overt and openly declared forms of unrest constitute only the tip of the iceberg of options – although arguably the most powerful ones – available to workers seeking to resist the commodification of their labour and the effects of this process. James Scott (1985) has pointed attention to the many manners in which subordinate classes resist domination and exploitation in more subtle ways. Cohen (1980) has found similar practices prevailing among industrial workers in Africa in particular. Examples of everyday forms of resistance identified in this context include desertion, withdrawal, foot dragging, absenteeism, theft, sabotage, wastage, accidents, illness, petitions, lobbies, collective appeal and insubordination (Cohen 1980; Burawoy 1985; Kelly 2002: 37-38). Everyday forms of resistance may – according to the conjuncture – be every much as efficient as large scale acts of collective resistance. They have the advantages of requiring little coordination, planning, or formal organisation – as 'they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks', and they 'typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority' (Scott 1985: 29). Such everyday forms of resistance are treated seriously and meticulously by employers, but they also allow the latter to make use of the power asymmetry prevalent between themselves and individual employees in a manner which is not always possible when confronted with a coordinated challenge by an organised collective of workers.

2.3.2 Outcomes of unrest

Although the outcome of unrest are highly contingent – upon factors that include, but are not limited to the associational and strategic aspects of power of workers[29]; context; and the relative power of adversaries – some general observations and trends have been observed. Generally, there appears to be a strong connection between the prevalence, strength, and militancy of a labour movement, on the one hand, and wage outcomes on the other. Cohn (1993: 1), for example, has stated that 'there is now a very large econometric literature … all of which show a positive union wage effect'. He (1993: 50) has also argued that frequent striking, regardless of whether strikes are won or not, is 'an optimal strategy for raising wages'[30], since it 'gives a union a reputation for

[29] See Olin Wright (2000) and Silver (2003) for a discussion of these aspects of workers' power.
[30] Indeed, it is emphatically stated that 'workers *should* strike frequently [:] wages will be maximized by maintaining a high level of pressure on management' (Cohn 1993: 27).

militancy, which in turn intimidates employers into making relatively generous settlements'. But, he, cautions, 'an exception occurs when the labour movement is divided into radical and moderate factions', in which cases 'militancy is often punished by a shifting of benefits toward more strike averse workers'. Another exception, in which Cohn (1993: 28) considers striking irrational, is cases where 'workers are so weak that they lack any capacity for forcing premium wages on management', or, inversely, where their strength threatens the viability of the enterprise.

Silver (2003), meanwhile, has outlined the broader historical dynamics of the movement of wages and unrest on a global scale: while capital tends to respond to the lure of cheap and domicile labour and relocate production to exploit such opportunities, this generally results in a process that strengthens the labour movement and shifts the balance of forces between labour and capital. Strong labour movements engaging in sustained strike activity have, in turn, generally 'succeeded in raising wages, improving working conditions, and strengthening workers' rights' (2003: 168). This general conclusion of Silver's is reinforced by her findings in specific contexts such as those of auto workers in Western Europe (2003: 52), Brazil (2003: 56) and South Africa (2003: 58). A number of scholarly accounts, such as Cohn's (1993) research on strikes among coalminers in France[31] and Franzosi's (2006) on Italy, largely corroborate these findings. However, it is noteworthy that Silver found a greater propensity of capital in early starters of a specific industry to accept salary increments (2003: 79). Late developers did not benefit from the same monopolistic profit margin and thus tended to be more resistant to have this margin pressed by increasing labour costs. For this and other[32] reasons, textile workers, despite high levels of unrest within the industry, have not been as successful in obtaining wage concessions as, for example, auto workers (2003: 81, 89). While unrest can thus be said to generally support and/or advance the position of labour, it does not always result in real wage gains. This contingent character of the relationship is illustrated in Brenner et al (2010). While labour radicalism and unrest helped to fuel a significant wage hike through the second half of 1940s and the 1950s in the United states (2010: 45-47), and another round of unrest contributed to a new period of real wage growth on continental Europe in

[31] For Cohn, the casual relation between militant practices and wage gains, has implications on how bureaucratisation is viewed: 'the centralised control of strikes by union bureaucracies risks gutting the effectiveness of organised labour', he (1993: 219) has written. 'Unions benefit from maximising their militancy. Any union structure that increases the strike rate should be encouraged; any structure that pacifies unions is more suspect'.

[32] Silver (2003: 92-93) argues that the relative vertical disintegration of the textile industry results in low workplace bargaining power for textile workers, and that this position has generally been further weakened by a relatively weak labour market bargaining power.

the 1970s (2010: xvii), a contemporaneous strike wave in the United States failed to achieve any similar real wage gains. In all cases, the effect on wages cannot be determined solely by the agency of the workers, but the responses and actions of capital and the state, and the qualities of the broader political economy in which they take place, must be taken into consideration.

With regards to effects of unrest on the structures of organised labour, it has been observed that militancy, expressed in an assertive strategy and collective action, may not only energise existing structures but result in sharp increases of membership (Kelly 2002: 60-64). Franzosi (2006: 344) has noted how union membership and 'the expansion of working-class organisational resources seem to have followed intense periods of industrial conflict [and] strike waves in particular' in Italy. This affected not only membership numbers, but 'the full political organisation of the working class and its political position in the national power structure' (Franzosi 2006: 344) was also altered by strike waves. Upsurges in membership may, as Cohn (1993: 213) suggests, be an outcome of the demonstrated success of a strategy of confrontation. Such a strategy convinces employers that the 'workers [are] interested in striking for its own sake', and, in doing so '[induces] employers to provide them with extra wages as a peace payment'. 'Where unions have visibly demonstrated their effectiveness in pursuing, and winning, employee claims and grievances through strike action', Kelly (2002: 62) writes, corroborating this point, 'non-union workers have been encouraged to join in unusually large numbers'. This, Kelly (2002: 101) has argued, may set 'a virtuous circle of effectiveness and membership' in motion, as it did in early 20th century United Kingdom: 'as the scale of strike activity increased, so did the win rate, and as the win rate increased, bargaining coverage rose, more workers perceived unions to be effective and joined them, which in turn enabled more strikes to be called… and so on'. The obvious corollary here is that the reverse may also hold true: that a cycle of defeat, ineffectiveness and reduced membership may also be set in motion.

2.3.1 Causes of unrest

If, as claimed in the above, it is the commodification of labour and concomitant exploitation that constitutes the fundamental source of friction generating labour unrest, certain factors more directly conditions – either in a conducive or restraining manner – its prevalence. As Kelly (2002: 25) has pointed out, 'the conflict of interest that lies at the heart of the capitalist employment relationship does not necessarily give rise to conflict behaviour'. Perhaps curiously, research has

failed to establish a firm a correlation between changes in union density and wages on the one hand and strikes on the other: low wages and powerful unions do not by themselves seem to result in militant practices and assertive strategies (Armstrong et al. 1977; Kelly 2002: 10). This, however, can be attributed to the fact that the prevalence of strikes is conditioned by a host of other factors including strategic consideration, the countervailing power of capital and the state, and – with reference to the discussion above – that 'workers can use sanctions other than strikes' (Kelly 2002: 10). For strikes to become the sanction of choice, other factors, such as high levels of employment, the availability of sufficient strike funds, and, crucially, the memories of past victorious strikes, have been found conducive (Brown 1983). For Kelly (2002: 1), workers collectivism, including strikes, 'is an effective and situationally specific response to injustice'. Following Tilly (1987), Kelly (2002) argues that for collective action to be viable, a number of aspects need to be considered. These encompass the social construction and definition of collective interests; collective mobilisation which transforms individual workers into collective actors; collective organisation; and opportunity, which includes considerations regarding the relative balance of power, the costs of repressions, and contingent opportunities available. Here, it is the sense of injustice, rather than absolute levels of deprivation or affluence, that is the starting point of any viable action. Having acquired a sense of injustice workers also require 'a sense of common identity' and a sense of common interest vis-à-vis the employer. This aspect is considered 'heavily dependent on the actions of small numbers of leaders or activists' (2002: 44). For that reason, demobilisation may very well result from the repression and removal of leading activists. But repression may also be effective in reducing unrest when 'raising the costs of collective organisation and action' (2002: 52). Employers and the state generally undertake counter-mobilisation which is 'likely to target all of the dimensions of collectivism' (2002: 128). In other words, attempts will be made to restrict opportunities and impose higher costs on collective action, overturn goals and leaders, rearticulate interests, undermine organisations, and demobilise workers.

The key dynamic identified by Kelly (2002: 1), however, is related to the long waves of capitalist development. Not only occurrences of unrest, but the full 'fluctuating fortunes of national labour movements', in fact, is said to 'follow predictable patterns that are closely synchronised with the rhythms of the capitalist economy'. The characteristics of the relationship is said to be as follows (Kelly 2002: 86):

> *Each turning point between upswing and downswing is associated with an upsurge of worker mobilisation, epitomised by heightened strike activity. This in turn triggers off a period of counter-mobilisation by employers and the state, and out of this intensified period of class struggle emerges a more or less far reaching reconstruction of the relations between labour, capital and the state. Once the new phase of the long wave (upswing or downswing) gets under way, new patterns of industrial relations are gradually, if unevenly, consolidated until the next transition. During long downswings these patterns are likely to reflect the interests of employers as they exploit slack labour markets in order to consolidate their power and hegemony, but the situation during long upswings is not so clear cut. For long wave theorists it is the regular and periodic ruptures in labour-capital relations that lay the foundations for the intervening periods of relative stability.*

It is, in other words, at the turning points of the economic conjuncture that the highest levels of strikes and unrest tend to occur. The reasons for this is traced to how 'employers, particularly in manufacturing, experience declining rates of profit towards the tail end of a long upswing and attempt to restore profitability in ways that impinge either directly on workers' living standards (through wage controls or wage cuts, intensification of labour or labour shedding) or indirectly, by raising prices to customers'. This, in turn, generates a growing sense of injustice among workers that sets a process of mobilisation in motion (Kelly 2002: 98). The economic restructuring that takes place during these periods – including crucially the downward adjustments of wages – in turn creates the conditions for a new cycle of mobilisation. The factors that produce a repetition of the cycle are thus built into the process. The argument is not far removed from Franzosi's (2006: 345, 356), who argues that while 'strikes flare up during booms and die out during busts', 'the business cycle itself can be viewed as a product of class conflict, as the by-product of employers' actions and state actions aimed at curbing labour militancy by thwarting workers' bargaining power in the labour market'.

Screpanti (1984) also makes a contribution to this field of scholarship, concerned with the correlation between explosions in class conflict and long economic waves – a causative correlation that is deemed to work in both directions. This discussion takes place within a field, however, that assigns to purely objective and economic conditions – the business cycle, or the long economic waves – the determinant role behind the orientation of labour movements. Although important in drawing attention to the manner in which economic downturns often trigger class conflict and unrest, the explanatory framework is limited in scope when explaining the concrete dynamics

behind surges of such unrest, termed *proletarian insurgencies*[33]. At the very least, broad economic changes are subject to the mediation on a number of levels before generating the subjective force that result in proletarian insurgencies. Screpanti (1984: 524) acknowledges as much when he states that 'a dependent relationship [between determinant economic parameters and the intensity of class struggle] however is mediated by a psycho-sociological variable', prior to which, 'there are obviously a number of constraining and contingent forces that may very well determine and result in a lesser outcome'. Unfortunately, he restricts his discussion on such mediation to essentially one variable; and a broad, not entirely empirically unproblematic, one at that: *class consciousness*. This is not a category that is deployed within this research, since it is not measurable outside of, and can only be displayed in, the collective practices of the workers. Because its operationalisation, or its expression, requires the measurement of the very same phenomena as is the objective of this research to measure in any way, it would add only an intermediary category which is not separately measurable in any case. For this reason, the category of class consciousness is not thought to add any clarity *at this point*, although it may very well be argued that the findings generated here has implications on that level of abstraction.

2.3.3 Reciprocities

Somewhat relating to the above discussion on a virtuous cycle of effectiveness and membership growth, Screpanti (1984: 530) too suggest that a virtuous cycle can be generated – this time between achievements and assertiveness. Crucially, however, he firmly anchors this possibility in the broader economy, and in fact reduces it to an outcome of, again, the business cycle. 'Any consolidated increase in [wage growth] achievements induces expectations of further increases', he writes:

> *When a high growth rate has sustained substantial increases in achievements for a long time, workers become acquainted with high and increasing levels of welfare, while at the same time they become aware of the existence of a persistent gap between claims and achievements. They could, quite correctly, consider the first fact as an effect of the second, in which case they will aim still higher. In other words, there is a positive cumulative effect of past experience in relation to actual claims.*

[33] Proletarian insurgencies can be thought of as 'unusual explosions in social strife' marked by exceptionally high levels of strike activity and industrial unrest. They can be global or localised. The most recent global proletarian insurgency, according to Screpanti, occurred between 1967 and 1973.

If it is assumed, however, that not only economic conjunctures, but also the agency of workers can produce such 'substantial increases in achievements', then, the above would lead to the conclusion that effective agency too can make workers 'aim still higher'. In other words, a virtuous, and somewhat path-dependent, cycle of increasing assertiveness, unrest and achievements would be created. Meanwhile, Screpanti (1984:531) notes that an equally vicious cycle can be generated:

> *When the rate of growth has for a long time been so low that it brings about substantial and long-lasting decrease in the levels of employment and workers welfare, claims will subside and gradually adapt to a decreasing level of achievements. In this case too, a cumulative effect of past experience will be at work. The adaptation will be resisted with decreasing strength as time goes on, and the gap between claims and achievements will narrow at a faster and faster pace.*

Again, the determinant role of the business cycle must be suspended for this theorisation to be of importance here. As soon as that is done, it is apparent that the account of 'decreasing level of achievement', leading to claims subsiding and a 'decreasing strength' of resistance, is very relevant. Summing up, Screpanti's (1984:531) general hypothesis that 'claims will change in time in the same direction as achievements, and in such a way that the rate of change of the gap between them will increase (or decrease) as achievements themselves increase (or decrease)', can be taken as a valuable proposition. Not only is it useful – when the element of business-cycle-determinism is dropped – but it moreover highlights the degree to which causes and effects merge and refuse to readily lend themselves to disentanglement.

2.3.4 Establishing position: alternative determinants of wages

In the above, the element of workers' agency in wage determination – here measured both as a proxy for the broader position of labour, and, in its own right, a most important aspect of contestation – has been discussed. However, for the relative importance of this agency to be assessed, a number of conditioning factors and alternative explanations for overall wage movements need to be briefly touched upon. In broad strokes, a number of key factors have been identified in wage determination, the prominence of which are arranged differently according to the theoretical terrain.

There is broad agreement that wages are – to different degrees – affected by productivity levels. In the currently dominant strand of neoclassical oriented economics, it is the marginal productivity of labour rather than the overall productivity that determines wages. However, attendant market

factors and political 'distortions' of price also exercise influence. The supply and demand of labour is the most important market factor upheld in classical and Keynesian theory, as a higher supply of labour requires the price to fall in order for the market to 'clear', and a decrease of supply has the reverse effect. For the same reason, full employment restricts the supply of available labour and thus makes it costlier. High labour costs, moreover, is considered a problem since the nominal rigidity – or 'stickiness' – of wages, it is argued, prevents them from falling in order for the market to 'clear' when the conjuncture shifts downwards. This is a most important aspect of Keynesian wage theory.

Collective bargaining, and the effect of trade unions, meanwhile, constitutes an additional factor affecting price of labour: 'few', indeed, 'if any would deny bargaining power effect on wages', Dobb (1946: 131) has written. In the bargaining theory of wages, this aspect is dominant. For neoclassically inclined economists this effect distorts the labour market, 'artificially' setting a higher price than that which would allow supply to meet demand, and thus preventing the market from 'clearing'. The result, in other words, is unemployment. But it is not only collective bargaining and the implied collective refusal by workers to work for 'market' wages which is seen as causing distortions, but also other forms of wage regulation, including the establishment of a minimum pay.

In classical Ricardian theory, wages are unlikely to move too far away from subsistence costs. A similar view has frequently been ascribed to Marx, although this interpretation has been rejected by Marxian scholars (Harvey 2006; Mann 2007). While Marx (1977; 1985) stated that the price of commodified labour was subject to similar forces as other commodities, and that one level of determination was therefore the cost of its reproduction, he also pointed out that labour was a peculiar commodity whose value was socially and historically contingent[34]. If wages are thus, in the final instance, underpinned by 'the price of the necessary means of subsistence' (Marx 1977: 209), this cost is in itself determined by needs which are socially and historically constructed, and can therefore not be reduced to the cost of any fixed basket of commodities or the likes. Moreover, other factors, such as the level of productivity and the relationship between supply and demand, impinges on this process, and the generation of super-profits – resultant from higher-than-average

[34] 'By comparing the standard wages or values of labour in different countries, and by comparing them in different historical epochs of the same country' Marx (1985: 145) wrote, 'you will find that the *value of labour* itself is not a fixed but a variable magnitude, even supposing the values of all other commodities to remain constant'.

productivity, the prevalence of monopoly pricing, or by means of unequal exchange – may enable higher wages in a particular enterprise, sector, or economy, without squeezing the rate of profit. But the relation between these factors and wages may not appear straightforward, as any given outcome is the product of particular social and historical processes, which crucially include class struggle[35].

Over the short and medium-term, at least, and within cyclical phases, *wage share*[36] gains can be achieved by collectively organised and struggling workers. Pressing in the opposite direction, the logic of accumulation and competition compels capital to encroach on the wage share, occasionally and temporarily even driving wages below the cost of reproduction of labour. In Marx' (1985: 146) words, 'the fixation of [the] actual degree [of profits, and hence, wages] is only settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labour, the capitalist constantly tending to reduce wages to their physical minimum, and to extend the working day to its physical maximum, while the working man constantly presses in the opposite direction'. 'The matter', he wrote, 'resolves itself into a question of the respective powers of the combatants'. But within a capitalist mode of production, the outcome cannot be entirely open-ended. As is the case for any commodity, prices cannot be set independent of demand and supply[37]. On the one hand, increasing labour costs lead to a drop in capitalist demand and, on the other, a reserve supply of labour – which constitutes an integral component of the capitalist labour market – exercises pressure on wages. Moreover, the centrality of the profit motive and accumulation to the logic of capitalism imposes an outer limit. Wages are unlikely to reach and remain at levels where they fundamentally alter the share of value that accrues to labour and interfered with accumulation over the long run. Only the abolition of the wage system altogether, Marx (1985) argued, could achieve that.

As Samir Amin (1977: 197-199) has noted, wage determination models developed in one context may not always transfer well to significantly different contexts: while in general a higher level of productivity not only enables, but makes necessary higher wages, this is not necessarily so in

[35] Mann (2007:45-46) has made this point in cogent terms, stating that 'wage rates have no straightforward market-determined level; they vary enormously and are always influenced by the agency of workers, capitalists and the state… determination in the purely "economic" sense is impossible, for it posits a wage outside lived history'.
[36] Which represents that part of the total value of output that accrues to labour in wages and thus, unlike the individual wage rate, denotes the relative degree of compensation/exploitation.
[37] 'The necessity of debating their price with the capitalist', Marx (1985: 148) wrote about wage labour, 'is inherent to their condition of having to sell themselves as commodities' – it cannot be independently set.

economies dominated by a peasant-based agrarian sector. In those economies, where wage labour covers only a small percentage of the population, Amin has found the 'political dimension' to wage setting differing from that in industrial economies in which wage labour is the norm[38]. In this case, there is according to Amin 'no obvious relation' between wage movements and the performance of the economy. A low pace of growth can be accompanied by sharp wage increments, while rapid growth may sometimes not result in any wage gains at all, he observed. In fact, in some cases, 'there is not the slightest correlation between the movement of wages and the pace of industrialisation, or even the movements of profits'. The full range of explanations for this phenomenon, Amin admits, are not simply identified. However, one key and compelling explanation is offered: 'elastic behaviour, upward or downward, in real terms, is only possible, of course, because the problem of wages does not constitute the main axis of income distribution'. In other words, it is because of the relative unimportance of surpluses generated in the waged sectors that the movement of wages appears as largely autonomous from the performance of the larger economy. Should this be the case, it would logically follow that one should expect this elastic autonomy of wages to decline in degree whenever the relative importance and share of the waged sector in producing and distributing surpluses increases.

2.4 Labour and trade union movements in Africa

In African economies, the historical context of the emergence of the labour movement diverged from that in Europe. Trade unions often came into being in a colonial context where the struggle for national liberation created conditions conducive to an alliance between labour and nationalist movements. With independence and the coming to power of the nationalist movements, organised labour was frequently drawn into the close orbit of the state. Trade unions in Africa thus, from the very outset, came to be explicitly associated with the high politics of state power (Buhlungu 2010; Freund 1988: 94-96). 'At every turn', it has been claimed, 'African unions [found] themselves deeply involved in politics' (Davies 1966: 11-12).Yet, in aligning themselves with nationalist

[38] An explanation often suggested for relatively high wages in African economies have been that high wages are paid in the public sector for political reasons. Because of the generally large share of public employment in total wage employment, these wages 'spill over' into the private sector as well. A version of this argument was offered by Kilby (1967), who claimed that trade unions in Nigeria had been generating wage increases. This, however, was not because of collective bargaining, or because of the wielding of the strike threat, but rather because of the electoral threat unions had wielded against the government. Kilby's account led to the Kilby/Weeks-debate, where the latter (Weeks 1968; 1971) claimed that while political pressure on the government had been important, wage gains had been unrelated to the operation of the unions.

movements, the notion of conflict between capital and labour – central to the development of trade unionism elsewhere – was suppressed in favour of national liberation and, with the dawn of independence, of developmentalism[39] (Beckman and Sachikonye 2010: 2-3; Buhlungu 2010; Lynd 1968: 33). The rhetoric of common national interests, however, did not abolish the prevalence of conflicting classed interests, nor did it alter the interest of the state in creating a stable environment conducive to capitalist growth. As a result, organised labour came to be seen as a threat over which 'a tight rein' had to be exercised 'through surveillance, co-option and/or coercion' (Buhlungu 2010: 202). In virtually all post-colonial societies, Buhlungu (2010: 193) writes, 'nationalist regimes sought to integrate or subordinate trade unions to the ruling party'. Measures aimed at reducing the autonomous strength of the unions included 'compulsory arbitration, registration of unions, granting and withholding of patronage, surveillance and inspection, government approval of international alignments and of acceptance of foreign assistance, party control over union leadership, and the co-opting of labour leaders into the political and administrative apparatuses of government'. The relationship between state and unions came to constrain the unions rather than empower them, as a result it has been argued that the latter failed both to remain representative of its membership and to effectively influence state policy (Koçer and Hayter 2011: 26).

In addition to the general pressures that constrain unions discussed in the section above, it has been proposed that unions operating in African contexts have been subject to a number of additional obstacles and limitations. While state control, co-option and repression provide formidable obstacles, it may be argued that this is rather an outcome of a position of weakness than a factor explaining it. A number of factors have been proposed as explaining the perceived weakness of African unions that do not directly attribute it to a subservient relationship to the state. First, it has been argued that the small relative size of the wage labouring population, in combination with the proportionally large size of the informal sector, has tended to reduce the leverage of organised labour. Yet, it may be argued that the absolute size of the wage labouring population[40], its central strategic location – economically as well as geographically – and its capacity to organise, more than makes up for its limited size (Beckman and Sachikonye 2010: 8-11; Koçer and Hayter 2011; Kraus 2007a). The centrality of wage labour to capitalism, Beckman and Sachikonye (2010: 20-

[39]It should be noted that it is not suggested that all political alignment entails full co-option. For Beckman and Sachikonye (2010: 12) the crucial question is on whose behalf unions are intervening politically – is it 'to serve narrow self-interests of leaders/careerists, or spear-heading another social order?', they ask.
[40]Estimated to over 100 million continent-wide (Koçer and Hayter, 2011: 9).

21) argue, underlines this strategic leverage. Second, however, it is clear that African unions in general has had to work under conditions of considerable financial difficulties. These difficulties have reduced the ability of unions to operate autonomously and augmented moderating external pressures by making unions financially reliant on international ties or even on the state itself (Berg and Butler 1964: 375-376). Third, it has been proposed that the make-up of the workforce has inhibited the formation of solidarities required to act in concert. African workforces often consist of large pools of migrant and temporary workers that may retain land and connections to the agricultural sector, implying that their stakes in wage employment are lower (Berg and Butler 1964: 375, 378-379). Ethnic/national divisions, furthermore, has been identified as a potential source of disunity. Yet, as Lynd (1968: 35-36) has stated, **'**trade unions almost always are the most detribalised [sic] organisational groups in the newly emerging African social structures'. Finally, it has been noted that patrimonial structures have tended to reinforce the process of bureaucratisation by legitimising a 'personalisation' of office and the resources that office commands (Berg and Butler 1964: 379; Lynd 28-29).

Despite the factors discussed above, however, African labour movements have repeatedly been able to create a space for relative autonomous action and play a key role in important political processes, such as campaigns against authoritarian governments and austerity programmes (Koçer and Hayter 2011; Kraus 2007a: 21; 2007c; Beckman and Sachikonye 2010: 5). In doing so the unions have often punched far above their perceived political weight. 'During the entire post war period', Koçer and Hayter (2011: 25) have written, '[African] trade unions have been crucial actors whose influence exceeded beyond the realm of industrial relations and whose attitude and demands always surprised the ruling elite'. This has been the experience of relatively small as well as large movements (Kraus 2007a: 25), dispelling the notion that clout is a direct function of size. Nevertheless, a number of variables that condition relative strength have been identified by Kraus (2007b: 87). These include, in addition to size, strategic location; collective cohesion and capabilities; capability to mobilise support; intra-union relations; and linkages to other collective actors and political parties. Kraus considers autonomy from the state to be an additional source of strength. Yet, as discussed above, it is not obvious whether this is a source or an outcome of strength. Summing up the discussion on the potential clout of African unions, the following explanation, offered by Kraus (2007a: 21), is illuminating:

> *Trade unions have a greater capacity for extensive mobilisation of protest than almost any other social group at critical times, given their existing network of unions and branches. These can potentially be mobilised for protests, demonstrations, and strikes.... A union's mass base tends to have some common interests, and it may have developed a conscious identity on the basis of its lived labour and protest experiences…Unlike any other social group, unions are comprised of members who are strategically located to disrupt the economy – and often government as well – and, hence, challenge the operations of the incumbent regime directly.*

On a more abstract level, it has been argued that the most important aspect of unions in African contexts can be found elsewhere – in that they constitutes 'the largest, and sometimes only, significant organisational force that represents the interests of the popular classes, the non-elite' (Kraus 2007c: 283). This is particularly important 'in elite-dominated polities', according to Kraus (2007b: 83), where, as 'virtually the *only* group representing the popular classes that has continuing organisational influence at the national level', it can pose 'challenging questions about rights of mass access to public resources' (Kraus 2007c: 256). In this sense, the labour movement takes on a larger purpose that, while class-based, does not merely correspond to the corporate interests of the membership.

2.5 The Ethiopian labour movement in the literature

The Ethiopian labour movement has largely escaped serious scholarly attention. Although leftist-inspired scholarship on Ethiopia showed some curiosity towards the wage labouring population and organised labour in the 1970s and early 1980s, such curiosity was generally eclipsed by the attention paid to agrarian relations and to questions of state power. This is not to say that valuable contributions cannot be found in the literature, but rather that they generally consist of rare, fragmented and scattered references within discussions on other topics. Nevertheless, by revisiting these references it is possible to assemble, at the very least, a general picture of how the Ethiopian labour movement has been depicted in the scholarly literature.

One major and outstanding exception to what has been stated above is Tom Killion's 1985 PhD dissertation *Workers, Capital and the State in the Ethiopian Region, 1919-1974*. Killion's dissertation focuses on the interrelation between a 'modernising' imperial state, capital, and an emerging regional working class in Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, focusing on organised labour. It describes, in broad strokes how workers throughout the region came to organise in ever more advanced constellations. The regional characterisation of the emerging working class is derived from Killion's theorisation of the integrated nature of the political economy spanning the Horn of

Africa. This regional working class was, it is argued, fractured into national working classes beginning with the political-economic shifts that started with the build-up to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930s, and the concomitant emergence of a separate Eritrean political economy. From this point on, much of Killion's attention is shifted to the manner in which the Eritrean labour movement became a harbinger of the Eritrean nationalist movement. But alongside this, valuable insights into the process of formation and development of the Ethiopian labour movement are produced.

For Killion, the 'incipient' (Killion 1985: 4) and 'incomplete' (ibid: 2) process of working class formation began with the emergence of capitalist relations of production and of wage labour and it culminated in the 'CELU decade' of 1963-1973, as well the 'denouement' (Ibid: 545) of the labour movement in the Ethiopian revolution that followed. Killion describes how, from the first formations, the workers in the region came to develop more advanced forms of organisations, and how this combined with occasional instances of state facilitation, more consistent attempts at containment, and intermittent repression. Despite this, the ideas and practices of organised labour continued to be disseminated throughout the workforce, and in light of surging levels of agitation and unrest among the workers, it became increasingly difficult for the state to contain the movement while continuing to deny recognition. These pressures, according to Killion, played an important role in forcing the imperial state to formally legalise unionism in the early 1960s and permit the formation of CELU. Yet, in Killion's interpretation the labour movement was always, and remained, subordinated to the state. Despite Killion recognising that by the time of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution parts of the labour movement had gained a certain degree of autonomy, that a radical strand had emerged and was gathering force, and that this allowed workers to have a 'significant impact' (ibid: 2) on the revolution, he insists that subordination always persisted.

A source of strength of Killion's analysis can be found in his deciphering of the interlinked manner in which the process of working class formation within 'the Ethiopian region' took place. This is an important insight, which is convincingly argued. The conclusion pertaining to the alleged subordination of Ethiopian workers to the state is more tenuous, and does not sit comfortably with the evidence presented – if 'subordination' is to mean anything more than a mechanical outcome of the legal-political sovereignty of the state. In Killion's understanding, this 'subordination' is partly an outcome of a 'false consciousness' that equated the interests of the state with that of the

workers (ibid: 12). Not only, however, is the question of establishing the validity of consciousness problematic, but Killion, more importantly, himself demonstrates that Ethiopian workers repeatedly displayed an orientation more autonomous, adversarial and confrontational than Killion's characterisation of 'false consciousness' and 'subordination' would allow for. Despite such qualifications, however, Killion's dissertation constitutes the essential point of departure for any serious engagement with the history of the Ethiopian labour movement. No other source provides any comparable depth or level of engagement with the topic at hand, although a number of texts deserve mention.

An account of the early development of the Ethiopian labour movement is presented in Stutz's (1967) paper *The Developing Industrial Relations System in Ethiopia*. Stutz's history of the emergence of the movement and imperial labour relations is descriptively rich, if analytically relatively limited in scope. Another early and largely descriptive study is Syoum Gebregziabher's *The Rise of CELU and EFE*[41] *under Haile Selassie's Regime* (2005[42]). From roughly the same period of time, Lynn Morehous' *Ethiopian Labour Relations: Attitudes, Practice and Law* (1969) provides a more analytically informed account. Morehous' concluding chapter – classified as confidential at the time of publication – points to the degree to which workers and local unionists had begun to see employers, the state, and even the central union leadership as inimical to their interests by the late 1960s. This is a rare observation from a time when Ethiopian industrial relations where generally perceived to be relatively amicable.

John Markakis' work on Ethiopian state-society relations have spanned over the last five decades, and have incorporated a number of observations pertaining to the labour movement. In his first volume (1974), the focus is on agrarian class relations and the labour movement appears only as a peripheral phenomenon, whose 'weakness' is identified as one of the reasons for the depressed level of wages (1974: 174-177). Markakis is by no means alone in characterising the Ethiopian labour movement at that time as weak, or to play down its importance. 'Since union membership was small and workplace-based, the unions were far less significant than the local neighbourhood associations, known as *iddir*', Clapham (1990: 35) has opined, while, according to Keller (1991: 149) the movement 'was never able to present a serious militant challenge to the status quo in the

[41] Employers' Federation of Ethiopia – more frequently referred to as the Federation of Employers of Ethiopia (FEE).
[42] This is a reprint of a text written in 1969.

industrial sector'. According to Lefort (1983: 27), the labour movement 'was apolitical, heterogeneous and atomised', while Gebru Tareke (2009: 23) has dismissed the emerging working class *in toto* as 'small, factional, and inconsequential, both qualitatively and quantitatively'.

Markakis' understanding of the nature and potential of the labour movement, however, was more nuanced than what the above would indicate, and he had noted that sporadic strikes and an upward momentum of 'the tempo of labour activity' had preceded the 1962 Labour Relations Decree and had 'force[d] itself on the attention of a distrustful government' (1974: 174). In his and Nega Ayele's (1978) *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* – written in the most forcefully contested phase of the revolution – the conditions of workers and the role of the labour movement discussed in more detail. Working class formation in Ethiopia was traced to the imperial 'modernisation' efforts of the 1950s and early 1960s. Working conditions were characterised as poor and pay levels as low. 'Strikes', they noted, 'were plenty' through the years following the 1962 labour relations decree and the establishment of CELU, 'but few were successful'. Mass dismissals were said to have been more common than employers conceding to workers' demand. To make things worse, they claimed, 'the position of labour deteriorated further in the late 1960s and early 1970s due to growing urban unemployment and the ravages of inflation'.

In general, almost all scholarly accounts of the pre-revolutionary position of labour tend to lend support to the view that working conditions were poor, pay levels were low, and collective rights negligible. This corroborates Killion's (1985: 429; 7) description of manufacturing wages in the 1960s as 'extremely low', being 'depressed by a virtually limitless "reserve army" of unskilled rural labour'. One prominent account, however, stands out as an exception here: Andargachew Tiruneh (1993: 309) has claimed that 'in the context of Ethiopia, to be a worker [was] not to be exploited so much as to be privileged: it [was] to have a regular income, however little, and to have access to health services and schools which were not, on the whole, available to the unemployed or to the peasants'.

In terms of industrial contestation, Markakis and Nega noted that the 1960s and early 1970s was a time of relatively frequent industrial unrest – a point almost entirely neglected elsewhere in the literature. In their reading of events, poor and deteriorating conditions, furthermore, combined with the obvious partiality of the state to produce an increasingly militant and politically conscious labour movement that eventually took the offensive in the context of the 1974 revolution. In this

account the working class was an enthusiastic participant in a spontaneous alliance of popular classes that propelled the revolution. As the incoming military rulers halted and reversed the revolutionary movement, labour and its allies ventured into militant opposition. This so-called 'stolen revolution' thesis has been criticised for not taking the transformative role of the incoming government into consideration (Messay 2011; Halliday and Molyneux 1981), and while the discussion of the workers' role in the revolution sheds light on a neglected aspect of the revolution, it remains sketchy, abstract and incomplete. In more recent works (2011; 2012), Markakis has moved towards a focus on other social forces and dynamics.

Several other works have discussed the labour movement within the specific context of the Ethiopian revolution. What these accounts have in common is that they completely subsume labour radicalism under the broader revolutionary process and treat it as a novel phenomenon having appeared suddenly in 1974, and lasted only briefly within the revolutionary upsurge. Bahru (2002: 231), for example, has written that prior to March 1974, 'CELU had been notable for its lethargy rather than its militancy', while Gebru Tareke (2009: 23) has claimed it was 'relatively placid and dormant throughout the 1960s' and that 'the torpor was shattered only amid the dramatic circumstances of the 1970s'. Ottaway (1976), meanwhile, was openly dismissive of labour's role, playing down what radicalism the movement displayed as mere pretension. The labour movement, she claimed, functioned as a vehicle for petty-bourgeois and white-collar interests, and opposed the incoming military government from a conservative position dressed in radical rhetoric.

This is a view that Marina and David Ottaway would reassert in their 1978 volume *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*. The Ottaways note with approval organised labour's participation in the early stages of revolution. When later events pitted the movement against the military rulers, however, their approval is withdrawn and replaced with scolding: the labour movement is characterised as a vehicle for narrow and moderate corporate interests of a privileged segment of the workforce. It is accused of being unable to compromise (ibid*:* 101-105), and its leadership is labelled 'incompetent', 'confused' and 'opportunist' (ibid: 106-107). But this account is not alone in treating the labour opposition as inauthentic and illegitimate. The process of radicalisation of the labour movement and CELU's opposition to the incoming military government, hinted to above, has frequently been characterised as the outcome of 'infiltration' by radicals in general

(Lefort 1983: 30), or, more frequently, the EPRP[43] in particular (Andargachew 1993: 141, 175; Negussay 1990: 20; Mengistu 1982: 31; Teferra 2011: 134). Not only does the concept of infiltration denote a mechanical and external form of control, but it also indicates illegitimacy.

Even CELU's ability to expand its membership by a full third in the aftermath of its 1974 general strike is belittling to the Ottaways, who scornfully note that it 'shows how great was its past failure to fully organise the working class'. The same authors' characterisation of CELU as largely representing white-collar and petty bourgeois interests (1978: 23) is echoed by Schwab (1985: 62-63), Halliday and Molyneux (1981: 81), and Lefort (1983: 26-27). Yet, in none of the instances is any evidence offered to substantiate the allegation. The assertion may be challenged on both empirical grounds – with most of the largest and dominant unions being constituted overwhelmingly by blue-collar workers[44] – and on conceptual grounds: the division implied is a rather artificial one, as the proletarian condition is premised on the compulsion to engage in wage labour rather than on pay grades and levels of education.

A more nuanced treatment of the labour movement in the early stages of the revolution is found in Emmanuel Fayessa Negassa's (1977) MA thesis on the 1974 general strike and its background. Emmanuel, a former CELU employee, delivers a rich account of the causes and immediate effects of the 1974 general strike. He concludes that its success enabled the previously divided movement to re-establish a certain sense of coherence and emerge larger and stronger. Seleshi Sisaye (1986; 1977), meanwhile, provides a rare empirical investigation of attitudes within the labour movement conducted in the immediate aftermath of the general strike. Intriguingly he records that while workers generally tended to view the strike in positive terms, respondents were divided on the causes and effects of the strike. While 'blue-collar' workers and workers from 'non-dominant nationalities' tended to be comparatively more prone to consider the cause and effect of the strike to be economic in nature, 'white-collar workers' and workers from 'dominant nationalities' generally tended to emphasise the political causes and effects of the general strike.

[43] Andargachew Tiruneh (1993: 142), who applies the idea of 'infiltration' with the greatest vigour, insists that the EPRP's rival leftist group MEISON too 'infiltrated' CELU.

[44] Examples of such large and influential blue-collar unions are those of the HVA Shoa-Wonji and Metahara sugar plantations and factories, the Indo-Ethiopian Textile Factory, the Dire Dawa cement and textile factories, the Bahir Dar textile factory and the Ethio-Djiboutian Railroad, while Ethiopian Airlines provides one of few examples of larger and influential white-collar unions.

The period of high PMAC rule saw a number of publications that included discussions on the position of the labour movement. Schwab (1985), in a text shamelessly apologetic of the military rulers of the time, imparts a positive image of labour organised along 'socialist' principles. The reorganised All-Ethiopia Trade Union and subsequent Ethiopian Trade Union, he claims, may have been constituted as a 'political organ of the state', but it had nevertheless allegedly 'achieved improvements in wages and benefits for its members, and [ensured] that unfair practices [were] dealt with' (1985: 63). Clapham (1990), on the other hand, displayed a larger dose of scepticism. He too understood the ETU as a primarily political structure, but was more pessimistic with regards to its ability to secure better conditions for its members. 'In the absence of pay rises', Clapham (1990: 137) writes, 'the unions have to encourage their membership with symbolic rewards'. Clapham also noted that although the ETU was represented within the Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), its political clout, or even relevance, was severely curtailed: 'there is nothing to indicate that either [the union representatives], or the organisation they represent, have any policy-making role; they are seldom referred to in the press, save for their appearance at official functions'.

More recent scholarly discussions on the Ethiopian labour movement are fewer in number and generally more limited in scope. Assefa Bersoufekad's (2003) account of trade unionism in Ethiopia is based on official sources and entirely descriptive. Mehari's, (2013) on the other hand, is an account of the legal framework of unionism in Ethiopia through three regimes. He describes the main contours of the evolution of Ethiopian labour law, and notes the inability of each of the three regimes to uphold a legal framework consistent with the International Labour Organisation's standards. Paulos (2006), meanwhile, accounts for how state control is achieved through non-legal and informal measures. Such allegations have been echoed by ILO (2012), and the concerns are reflected in Dessalegn Rahmato's (2002) account of civil society in Ethiopia. The trade union movement, Dessalegn argues, 'has been kept as a docile instrument of state policy by successive governments since the 1960s'. But Dessalegn cannot find any valid reasons for the state's continuous attention and attempts to achieve control over organised labour. Rather, it is interpreted as an irrational over-reaction which gives 'the trade union movement a significance and power far beyond its actual potential' (2002: 114). Ethiopian trade union history, he claims, is 'the result of false perceptions and an exaggerated sense of worth' (ibid: 114).

Praeg (2006) provides a substantial and informative discussion on the process by which a re-emergent relatively autonomous trade union confederation was re-subjugated in the mid-1990s. A similar discussion is found in Melakou (2013: 154), who points to the manner in which the current ruling party, with no official attachments to the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions, leads the latter 'from behind', through a party 'proletarian committee'. The role of this committee in exercising control over CETU is also mentioned by Markakis (2011: 251). Melakou, furthermore discusses how, in the context of the lead-up to the national elections of 2005, a televised debate on trade unions was interrupted by angry workers who claimed not to be represented by the pro-government leadership of CETU, and how the issue of low wages came to gather importance before the same elections.

Contemporary wages and working conditions are issues also raised in a recent paper by economists Blattman and Dercon (2016). Conducting another rare empirical survey of wage workers at five industrial and agro-industrial enterprises, they found that taking up manufacturing employment in contemporary Ethiopia did not appear to affect the income of job seekers positively at all. While working time tended to increase, this increase was offset by hourly wages that were significantly lower than the incomes that informal opportunities tended to generate[45]. Since they also found working conditions in the manufacturing sector to be hazardous, unemployed urbanites in contemporary Ethiopia appear to have little to gain by taking up manufacturing employment even where the alternative is unemployment. This, in turn, was manifested in high personnel turnover rates: over three quarters of the fresh employees included in the survey had quit within a year. Blattman and Dercon, moreover, described the position of organised labour in terms of outcomes in each workplace. The general picture was one of generally 'semi-active' or dormant unions concerned mostly with petitioning for changes in specific conditions and mediating disputes, rather than engaging in collective bargaining or industrial conflict. However, it is notable that at those workplaces where labour activity was described as unusually high, or where strikes and unrest had been occurring, workers had been successful in forcing management to make wage and non-wage concessions alike.

[45] 'We see no evidence of an industrial wage premium in these five firms. A simple (non-experimental) wage comparison adjusting for baseline characteristics suggests that industrial jobs seemed to pay almost a quarter lower wages than informal opportunities.' (Blattman and Dercon 2016: 4)

Finally, a number of documentary, biographical, and semi-biographical sources require mention. The first is an ambitious attempt to write the history of the Ethiopian labour movement organised by AETU and conducted by a committee working under its auspices (AETU 1984a; 1984b). The two-volume text is a sterile documentary history which maps key moments in the movements' history but contains little analysis. It suffers from having been produced under the period of high PMAC/WPE rule, and under a structure completely under its control. As a result, it cannot but sing the praise of the contemporaneous configuration in a highly politicised way and judge past struggles in light of this fidelity. A superior critical distance is achieved in Kiflu Tadesse's[46] two books on the history of the EPRP (1993; 1998) and his most recent work on Ethiopian history (2016). Kiflu's books include a detailed treatment of events within the labour movement and constitutes an important source of information on struggles of and within the labour movement, in the context of the revolution. Another source is Beyene Solomon's[47] autobiography and his account of the history of the Ethiopian labour movement (2010; 2012). While Kiflu's constitutes a defence of the oppositional and revolutionary labour movement, Beyene's is a defence of the moderate leadership that ruled CELU through the 1960s and was overthrown by the radicals in the mid-1970s.

[46] A former politburo member of the EPRP and a central committee member of the EPRP's labour front ELAMA.
[47] Former CELU president.

3. Setting the context

In this chapter, the structural context in which the Ethiopian labour movement has developed is outlined. This includes aspects of the social, political, economic and historical setting. Initially, the process of state formation and evolution, and the problems it has entailed, is discussed. The social composition of the Ethiopian population, and the diverging manner in which different populations came to be integrated into the Ethiopian social formation are matters of concern here, as is the evolution of the country's political structures. In the second part of the chapter the evolving Ethiopian political economy is the focus of closer attention. The problem of economic surpluses – their production, appropriation and distribution over time – and the concurrent evolving labour regime is discussed. The manner in, and conditions under which labour has been mobilised to produce surpluses, how, and by whom these surpluses have been used, constitutes the core concerns of this inquiry. Finally, the development of the manufacturing sector of Ethiopia and the concomitant development of a wage labouring population is discussed. The aim is to enable an understanding of the evolving position of labour within the broader political economy and labour regime, which constitute the structural context in which the labour movement operates, and aims to effect change upon.

3.1 Social and historical setting

The contemporary Ethiopian polity is largely the product of a twin process of internal consolidation and external expansion that commenced in the second half of the 19th century. After a prolonged period of political disintegration and competing centres of power, central state authority began to re-emerge around the mid-19th century. Over a period extending into the first decades of the 20th century, coinciding with and not unrelated to the colonial scramble for Africa, the territorial reach of the Ethiopian state was extended far south, west and east from its original northern core. In this process, new populations were forcefully incorporated into the Ethiopian empire. Despite its changing demographic base, the state retained its pronounced ‘northern’ socio-political features and biases. Incorporation took the shape of compelled assimilation. The process described above has been interpreted in a number of ways. Merera (2003) has helpfully distinguished between what he calls the ‘nation-building’, the ‘national oppression’ and the ‘colonial’ theses. For proponents of the former, territorial expansion is seen as a historical achievement, a process of national unification. Proponents of the ‘national oppression’ thesis, on

the other hand, acknowledge the injustices of the process and the national inequalities that it has created. They assign a prominent role to material inequalities, and the intersection of class and national oppression which is reflected in socio-cultural inequalities, and they argue that with the economic base reformed, the preconditions for the creation of just and equal national relations can be met. For proponents of the last thesis, however, no such reforms can be sufficient. Since the process of territorial expansion is conceived of as a process of colonisation, any acceptable solution must begin with decolonisation.

Whatever the merits of the different interpretations, the process of expansion created an Ethiopia with modified social and geographic characteristics. Spatially, the territorial reach of the expanded Ethiopian empire stretched southwards from the northern highland core, over the rift valley that cuts across it, onto a smaller south-eastern plateau, and into the surrounding lowlands. The main plateau is inhabited by agriculturalists belonging to the Amhara and Tigray in the north, the Oromo in the west and south, and a number of smaller populations – the Gurage, Welayta, Sidama, Hadiya, Gedeo and Kambata being the most populous – in the fertile south. In the northern and central parts of the plateau the majority of the population profess Orthodox Christianity. The south-eastern plateau is largely populated by Muslim Oromo. The two densely populated plateaus are surrounded by sparsely populated lowland peripheries inhabited by a number of nationalities practicing pastoralism and shifting agriculture. These nationalities are, unlike those inhabiting the main plateau, largely constituted by practitioners of Islam. The two largest populations of pastoralist communities in the lowlands are the Somali and the Afar.

Territorial expansion and consolidation was conjoined with a process of centralisation. From the mid-19th century onwards, powerful regional nobles and lords experienced a continuous and incremental rebalancing of power and authority in favour of the imperial centre. With the coming to power of Haile Selassie in the second decade of the 20th century, this process was accelerated through the institution of a professional bureaucracy and army. Other measures undertaken under the broad conception of 'modernisation' further contributed to the changing dynamics[48]. The institution of formal and higher education, the emergence and growth of an urban economy,

[48] Modernisation, while a problematic concept whose usage in the Ethiopianist literature has rightly been criticised (Bahru 2008: 98-100), is used here because it has become the conventional word for the process of politically instigated renewal and reform that the Ethiopian state embarked upon, which sought to emulate a number of institutions as found in Europe (Tsegaye 1996).

infrastructural expansion, and the emergence of national and standardised fiscal, financial and monetary systems all constitute complementary aspects of this process. The brief Italian occupation between 1936 and 1941 only served to accelerate this process. But below the surface, the contradictions generated by imperial modernisation, grafted on top of a basically absolutist and landlordist configuration, sharpened rapidly. Changes in the economy, and the demands for heightened surplus extraction from a slowly developing economic base, generated tensions. New urban educated categories, meanwhile, were alienated by the prevalence of a seemingly archaic absolutist system, and marginalised nationalities were becoming increasingly resentful towards discriminatory treatment. Despite a number of warning signs – regional revolts, peasant uprisings, rebellions among the nobility, assassination attempts, and a near-successful 1960 coup attempt – the imperial centre refused to yield to demands of fundamental reform. In 1974, the imperial regime was overthrown in a popular uprising, out of which a military body eventually seized power – the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), known simply as *Derg* in Amharic[49].

The post-revolutionary state – dominated as it was by the military – embarked upon a programme of extensive socio-economic reform. While it encouraged pluralism on a socio-cultural level – non-Amharic languages and cultural expressions were no longer supressed, and the state was separated from the church – it retained a hard-headed insistence on political centralism and territorial indivisibility[50]. Seventeen years of war with regionalist and nationalist forces followed, before Ethiopia was reconstituted as a federal state under the leadership of the victorious Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Nominally, Ethiopia had come full circle with regards to addressing the national question: assimilation and centralism had been replaced by the celebration of multinational diversity and national/ethnic self-determination. In the process, the coastal region of Eritrea, which had only become federated with Ethiopia in 1952 and incorporated

[49] This body operated under different names reflecting the evolution of its position. Initially, its name was the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police and Territorial Army; and after seizing state power it was renamed PMAC. It spawned and dominated the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia (PMGE), that later became the Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia (PMGSE); as well as, indirectly, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), which in turn was preceded by the Commission to Organize the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia (COPWE). Due to the striking continuity of policies and leading personas in these bodies, the PMAC/WPE period of rule is treated as an undivided sequence. The PMAC/WPE ruled the state known as Socialist Ethiopia after the toppling of the imperial regime, and its successor state the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) from its foundation in 1987 to its downfall in May 1991.

[50] The constitution of the PDRE, adopted in 1987, introduced five autonomous regions in order to undercut the lure insurgent movements that operated at the time. This formal concession, however, never accounted to any measure of self-determination, as the 'autonomous' status came without any constitutional powers or provisions whatsoever. The constitution, furthermore, explicitly stipulated that the PDRE remained a unitary state (Andargachew 1993: 282).

into the Ethiopian empire in 1962, had become independent. However, the dominance of a single ruling party and its affiliated parties at each level of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has done much to short-circuit the exercise of genuine self-determination (Markakis 2011; Merera 2003). While socio-culturally, the policy of assimilation may have been abandoned, and while nominally the major nationalities have been given equal recognition, socio-regional inequalities continue to loom large. In the political sphere, this is illustrated in continued regional imbalances[51]. It is, however, in the political economy that the inequalities and hierarchies are most obvious.

3.2 Surpluses and labour regimes in evolution

The concept of surpluses, in the Marxian sense, constitutes an analytical category which provides a key to the analysis of changing political economies. Surpluses are extracted from that part of production for which the labourer is not compensated. This may take the form of extra-economic coercion, as in the case of the serf bound to the land. Or it may be extracted through economic coercion, when the primary producers have been separated from the means of production and have no choice but to avail their labour to those in control of the means of production for incomplete compensation. Surplus extraction can take place in an unconcealed manner, such as in the case of the sharecropping farmer who is compelled to surrender a part of his product to a landlord for no immediate compensation. But it can also be concealed, and a most effective mechanism of concealing surplus extraction has proven to be that of the wage.

Wage labourers are compensated for only part of the time they sell their labour. If they were to be compensated for the full workday, no profits could be generated, as the Marxian conception of surpluses is premised on the notion that value is the product of labour[52]. For that part of the working day for which the labourer is not compensated, surplus labour is extracted[53]. Surplus labour results

[51] Take, for example, the fact that only parties from the Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples' Regional States are included in the EPRDF. Ruling parties of the peripheral and largely lowland regional states figure only as 'affiliates' of the EPRDF without voting rights. Another example of political imbalances is the lingering pre-eminence of the original core party – the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front – within the front, and the key offices of the federal state.

[52] Fixed capital, in the labour theory of value, is conceived of as the product of past labour. In this sense the 'dead labour' of fixed capital is combined with the living labour of the worker in the process of production.

[53] Surpluses may be generated from other economic activities than those actually performed by the contracted labourer. When, for example, wages are too low to actually fund the cost of the social reproduction of labour, wage labour needs to be subsidised from other sectors. This may take the shape of transfer of surpluses generated by non-compensated

in surplus product, which, when sold, results in the generation of surplus value. The wage mechanism mystifies and conceals the exploitative relations by which the extraction of surplus takes place to a greater extent than extra-economic coercion and unconcealed forms of surplus extraction allow for, but it is nevertheless essential that the accumulation of surpluses, in this way, is the accumulation of surplus labour. Surplus accumulation – capital formation – is essential to economic development, especially when this takes a capitalist form. In this way, the process of surplus accumulation simultaneously constitutes the *sine qua non* of capitalist development, and an exploitative practice that generates social contradictions. It is a contested process that showcase changing features over time, but it is the bedrock on which the development of capitalism must be understood. As labour regimes, according to the conceptualisation formulated in the above, constitute the structural qualities of the process in which surplus is extracted, the conjoined development of the labour regimes also requires a developed understanding.

3.2.1 Surpluses in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, surpluses have overwhelmingly been generated by and extracted from peasant producers[54]. This process took different institutional forms in different areas and over time, but the basic premise on which it rested was, broadly speaking, that of landlordism. In the northern 'core' provinces the institutional scaffolding of agrarian surplus extraction was the time-worn system of *rist* and *gult.* The peasantry enjoyed *rist* rights, which entailed an inheritable tenure right to a certain plot of land. But it came with obligations. That obligation took the form of *gult* which was superimposed over the *rist*-held land. The *gult*-holder was entitled to a share of the produce of the *rist*-holder, most often paid in kind, of which some part was either passed on to the state or not. The *gult*-holder was furthermore entitled to requisition free labour from the *rist*-holding peasant to construct houses and fences, conduct odd jobs, or, importantly, to cultivate the *gult*-holder's private land. The land of the *gult*-holder was furthermore generally exempted from taxation while that of the *rist*-holder was subject to a number of taxes. The surplus extracted through these mechanisms was in the early 20th century sufficient to fund a rudimentary state machinery, its

subsistence forms of labour taking place within the household, which is necessary for the wage labourer to sell his/her labour at such low wages. The transfer of surpluses generated by unpaid forms of labour within the household or community is an important aspect of exploitative relations. Despite this, the exact manner in which such surplus value can be calculated remains a practical difficulty (Komlosy 2016).

[54] The exposition on agrarian surplus extraction in imperial times that follows is based on Dessalegn 2009; Bahru 2002; Gebru 1995; Addis 1975; Markakis 1974; and Markakis and Nega 1978.

rulers and auxiliaries, and the traditional lords. Meanwhile, however, the peasantry was condemned to destitute conditions.

While this system changed over the 20th century leading up to the fall of the imperial regime – more taxes and central control over the mechanisms were imposed, while landlord autonomy was progressively eroded – it retained its central feature of agrarian surplus extraction from peasant agriculture. In the newly conquered southern provinces too, this feature constituted the central component of the system, but the manner in which it was put into operation was significantly harsher. Here, conquest had been followed by land alienation, as the state confiscated two-thirds of the land. The confiscated land was generally subdivided to the functionaries of the state, including the commanders and soldiers of the victorious armies, the administrators and retainers that followed, and the church. This system led to greater and more obvious contradictions as the exploitation lacked the veil of tradition and the communal embeddedness that was the case in the north (Markakis 1974). The newly imposed category of landlords were most frequently from an alien nationality, and were often absent as they generally preferred to take up residence in their home regions or in the emerging towns in the south. Class contradictions thus became reinforced by national, linguistic, religious and cultural aspects. The degree of surplus extraction – tenants were forced to relinquish up to 75 percent of their produce (Gebru 1995: 213) – only served to sharpen such contradictions, as did the reform agenda that was embarked upon during late imperial times. When the state began to issue title deeds and thus privatised ownership of land, the extent of the alienation and the condition of tenancy became apparent. The landlords were now free to expel the tenants.

The class structure generated by these relations was a fairly basic one consisting of an upper landlord class and a surplus-generating peasant class, subdivided between a *rist*-holding strata and a tenant one. In addition to this general division, a not insignificant number of landless agrarian labourers and a number of intermediary categories, sustained by the surpluses extracted from agrarian labour, including traders, prevailed. A newer sector, employing wage labour in mostly urban areas, complemented this. Additional – significantly lesser in degree – forms of surplus extraction took place through bandit activity and slave trade, prior to a ban on slave trade in 1924, and the total abolishment of slavery in 1942 (Fernyhough 2010; Pankhurst 1968). War-making, which was perennial through the first decades of the 20th century, also functioned as a means to

extract surpluses and redistribute resources (Tsegaye 1996). In the lowlands, where a pastoral economy prevailed, occasional incursions, in terms of raids, tribute demands, and the establishment of check-posts, substituted for a systematic process of extraction.

What, then, came of the surpluses extracted? The first conditioning factor to be noted is that surpluses, albeit relatively large, were quite minor in absolute terms. This was not the least so because of the neglect of investments in peasant agriculture. The state, when engaging with agriculture at all, was to focus on mechanised agriculture and commercial farms. The heavy surplus levees, furthermore, served to inhibit attempts by the peasantry to raise productivity – by reducing investible capital available, by lessening the incentives for output growth as increasing production resulted in increasing rent, and, in regions where tenancy was dominant, by linking increased productivity to increasing risk of eviction[55]. As for the landlord class, it has been claimed that its 'entrenched interests… thwarted the "modernisation" of agriculture' (Gebru 1995: 213), and that they 'were mostly eager to skim off as much of the peasant surplus as quick as possible' (Dessalegn 2009: 313) rather than reinvesting in peasant agriculture. The landlords, were in Gebru Mersha's (1995: 213) words, 'a very wasteful class which never understood the language of accumulation and hence never bothered to invest in agriculture to raise productivity'. A trickle of surpluses, made way into the emerging sectors of the economy and real estate, but mostly the landlord class 'frittered away the surplus it appropriated in conspicuous consumption and state administration' (Gebru 1995: 213).

Instead then, the newer sectors of the economy could only be developed by other actors. Mostly, this task was taken up by foreigners and the state, but in domestic trade and commercial agriculture a segment of local propertied actors had begun to emerge. Capitalist relations of production were emerging through the development of a number of new sectors. But this process was cut short by the 1974 revolution.

As land was nationalised and parcelled out to the peasantry in the aftermath of the revolution, landlordism was abolished altogether. 'The immediate impact' of the land reform, Dessalegn (2009: 321) has written, 'was to remove all classes from the countryside, except the labouring

[55] Where farmers were successful in increasing productivity through improved seeds and technology, the result was frequently that the private owner evicted the farmer and took over operation himself. This was also the unintentional outcome of a number of aid-financed schemes to raise agrarian productivity (Dessalegn 2009).

peasant, and to create a homogenous social structure consisting of a mass of poverty-stricken micro-holders'. Commercial farms were turned into state farms, and private manufacturing and financial establishments became state-owned enterprises. Surplus extraction was initially relaxed, but by the end of the 1970s a new regime of agrarian surplus extraction had been put in place. This centred on the imposition of quotas of agrarian output to be sold to the Agricultural Marketing Corporation for well-below-market prices. The commandist and state capitalist relations[56] that emerged in the new sectors put to test any notion of popular socialism. An expanding category of bureaucrats were put in charge of the economy, and ran it with iron-fist authoritarianism, albeit with little efficiency. Profitability in manufacturing started declining, and the state farms turned out to be financially disastrous[57]. Peasant agriculture, furthermore, became ensnared in an ever-worsening crisis, and in the mid-1980s, famine occurred. The war with insurgent forces that persisted unabated for the seventeen years reign of the first-post revolutionary regime, furthermore, squandered a major share of surpluses generated.

The PMAC-generated Workers' Party of Ethiopia itself gave up its pretension of 'building socialism' when it declared its intention to liberalise the economy in the late 1980s[58]. However, as it was by then teetering on the brink of collapse – which followed in 1991 – it was left to the incoming EPRDF government to complete the transition to private capitalism. The EPRDF's strategy was initially based on boosting peasant production and relieving the agrarian crisis. This strategy was one of inward-oriented 'agricultural development led-industrialisation'[59]. However, over the years, this has shifted to an outward led export-oriented strategy focused on attracting foreign capital and boosting manufacturing, supplemented with a newfound intention to develop commercial farming. This latter aspect of the strategy has led to what Fouad (2014) has described as an enclosure movement, where peasants, pastoralists, and populations of the peripheral regions again face land alienation[60]. Another result is that agrarian wage labour – manifested in the commercial farms of imperial times and state farms of the PMAC/WPE years – is again on the

[56] See Girma (1987) and Kelemen (1984), for discussions on Ethiopian state capitalism.
[57] However, while incurring financial losses, it could be argued that the state farms made greater surpluses possible in other sectors, as they contributed to lowering agricultural prices.
[58] In 1988 the WPE embarked on a path of reform towards private capitalism which, among other things, included a reembrace of private ownership in key sectors and deregulation. This process culminated in the March 1990 announcement of a new economic policy intended to introduce a 'mixed economy'.
[59] Demessie (2006) provides an analytical account of this strategy.
[60] See Dessalegn (2011); and Fouad (2014) for a discussion of this process. Tsegaye (2015), meanwhile, discusses the emerging patterns of resistance to this process.

rise. However, with regards to surplus extraction from the peasant agrarian sector, it can probably be concluded that the relative degree of such extraction has been continuously relaxed over the past five decades. First, the 1975 land reform and the emergence of an agrarian regime which, despite entailing exploitative features – such as the role of AMC mentioned in the above – nevertheless relieved the peasantry from some exactions. Second, the dismantlement of the AMC in the last years of WPE rule and the EPRDF's subsequent efforts to promote peasant agricultural development – which included an appreciation of the relative prices of agricultural goods – further reduced the level of extraction. Dessalegn (2009: 335-336) estimates that surplus extraction from peasant agriculture has decreased from around 60 percent of produce during the imperial regime; to 33 to 50 percent during the PMAC/WPE; and to a 'slightly lesser degree' in the contemporary period. The agrarian structure of a mass of micro-holders described above remains a defining feature of the Ethiopian political economy (Dessalegn 2009: 321), even if recent studies have noted trends towards increasing rural differentiation[61].

The degree and means of surplus extraction in the agrarian sector has thus tended to lessen over the past century. However, in the face of massive investment needs and accumulation requirements, what surplus requirements are relaxed in one sector, must inevitable be compensated for by greater surplus demands on other sectors. In the waged sectors, there have also been important labour regime changes. Because the level of surpluses/wages require more detailed analysis – found in chapter six of this dissertation – this point is not elaborated upon here. Rather, by looking at the evolution of the position of labour in terms of labour law, practices, and conditions, some patterns and trajectories of these aspects of the evolving wage labour regime can be outlined.

3.2.2 The legal regime

Ethiopia has had four general labour laws since the first labour relations proclamation came into force in 1963 (IEG 1962; 1963a; PMGE 1975; TGEE 1993; FDRE 2003). These are subject to a number of additional enactments that directly regulates different spheres of wage labour and organised labour. A number of generalities are observable across the evolving legal framework, as is a general trajectory. First, the stipulations relating to individual rights of workers have been fairly stable. While no Ethiopian labour law has included any minimum wage, they have all

[61] See for instance Lefort (2012).

established a 48 hours work-week. Similar provisions for overtime, annual, maternity and sick leave have been included, although substantial improvements have been registered as from the 1975 labour law onwards. Similarly, the 1975 labour proclamation saw a strengthening of provisions for job tenure security, and all subsequent editions have retained similar provisions[62]. Second, trade unions have remained dependent on registration – which has always come with certain preconditions – and they have persistently been subject to de-registration in case of falling out of favour. This has proved the most effective legally sanctioned mechanism by which to exercise everyday control. Third, all editions of the labour law have made it nearly impossible for workers to legally call a strike. Typically they have included provisions that only a registered trade union may call a strike, that more than a simple majority is required to vote for a strike call for it to be valid, and, most importantly, that such a strike cannot be called before a workplace trade dispute commission and/or and intermediate conciliator or body has failed to resolve the dispute. After such conciliation has failed, a time period – usually thirty days – has been required for a court or a labour relations board to review the case. The verdict of these bodies, furthermore, on whether a strike is permissible or not, has come with legal force. Not only has this route been arduous and time-consuming, but the likelihood that a labour relations board or labour court would ever sanction a strike – which its legality has depended on – is a dubious proposition to state the least. So far, in over five decades of practice, it is yet to occur. Fourth, all labour laws have made 'unfair labour practices', such as solidarity striking and attendant activities, illegal and subjected offending unions to sanctions. The penalties for illegal practices have included prison terms. Finally, the legal framework has consistently excluded significant parts of the workforce – notably civil servants and domestic workers – from the right to unionise, and they have denied workers engaged in the provision of 'essential services' even the curtailed hypothetical right to strike.

While all Ethiopian general labour laws thus include provisions for the exercise of control over trade unions, the PMAC's Labour Proclamation of 1975 and Trade Union Organisation Proclamation of 1982 went the furthest in emphasising this aspect, and carried the greatest sanctions. A centralising and hierarchic logic was imposed in the 1975 act, which stipulated that 'lower trade unions shall be subordinate to higher ones' and 'shall be obliged to accept and implement the decisions of higher trade unions'. The top leadership of the AETU, was assigned

[62] It appears, however, that the labour law currently under discussion will break this pattern and significantly undermine job security if adopted. See, for example, Dawit (2017b).

the function of overall control and to 'issue directives to unions to ensure their functioning in line with socialist principles'. Basic unions, meanwhile, were to 'encourage and stimulate workers to increase production, and to participate and render services to voluntary community activities' – a euphemism for the requisition of free labour. Meanwhile, illegal strikes, 'lack of good faith in a collective negotiation', failure to immediately execute 'an agreement, decision or order given at any level', or 'to obstruct or be the cause of a delay of the speedy settlement of a trade dispute', were all considered criminal acts punishable with one year in prison. The 1982 act reinforced the top-down logic of the 1975 proclamation, but also included a provision protecting leaders of the state-approved unions. It banned dismissals for disciplinary reasons, or transfer of any trade union leader without the prior approval of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. While the two similar labour acts of 1993 and 2003 retracted a number of the most centralising aspects of the code, they also removed this provision protecting trade union leaders. This was not coincidental. The government admitted that the legal reform was motivated by a perception that safeguards in previous legislation – however harsh elsewise – constituted a 'disincentive to private investors' whom the government was attempting to attract, and that it stifled productivity (CoR 1993: 49).

With regards to patterns of change, the legal framework has gradually opened the way for more workers to organise. This has meant that a minimum requirement for basic unions to be formed has decreased from a workplace labour force size of 50 to 10. It has also meant an expanded franchise in the type of workers that are permitted to unionise. While early labour legislation excluded seasonal workers – a form of employment that was dominant in the commercial farming economy – they have since been permitted to unionise. Finally, the first labour proclamation's ban on unions engaging in 'any political activity whatsoever' and the 1982 proclamation's reverse insistence on a certain type of politics – that of vulgarised 'socialism' – have been dropped.

In 2017, a new draft labour law was submitted to the Council of Ministers for review. This draft law entails significant curtailments of labour rights. Among other features, it entails stipulation that would double in length the period of probation and quadruple it in certain sectors, reduce annual leave, and lower compensation payments for workplace accidents. It would also allow the dismissal of workers who report late for work for two days in a one-month period, or five days during a six-months-period, or who are absent for a single day without medical certification. Obviously, this entails a considerable worsening of the legal labour regime, and another assault on

the position on labour. This has led the CETU to, in October 2017, issue a historical general strike threat, should the draft bill not be amended (Addis Fortune 2017; Dawit 2017a; 2017b).

3.2.3 Attendant practices

A consistent pattern of state practice is to ignore labour legislation when deemed incommensurate with state priorities. This takes place in addition to the extensive powers and the room for arbitrariness awarded to state institutions in the mentioned legislation in the first place. The state has allowed for extensive harassment of workers aspiring to organise, and of trade unions officials even in those sectors where the workers' rights to organise has been granted. This tendency is particularly common in industries and workplaces considered of strategic value, or where owners enjoy preferential access to high state officials[63]. The result has been to hamper the organisation of large parts of the wage-working population, as well as to discourage unions from operating in the interests of its members. There is, however, less evidence of everyday harassment of trade unionists during the high period of stable PMAC/WPE rule – for officials of the state-sanctioned trade unions structures, after they had been purged of oppositional and radical labour activists that is[64] – than during the preceding and succeeding regimes. There is a sound logic to this, as PMAC/WPE labour legislation invested official unions with the explicit function of operating as a political instrument directly subordinated to the state, as noted in the above. A certain level of protection came with falling in line behind this. Despite the retarding influence this had on the labour movement, it played a part in the surging number of organised workers during this period.

3.2.4 Labour conditions

Labour conditions in much of Ethiopia's waged sector have generally been regarded as poor throughout the recent past. The issue is too vast and diverse – both in spatial and temporal terms – for any detailed analysis to be undertaken here. Nevertheless, a number of different but typical observations may serve to illustrate the problem. Killion (1985: 427, 459) has described working conditions in the industries that emerged in the 1950s in general as 'harsh', with subsequent

[63] References abound in the literature on the systematic level of similar harassment in the past and in the present. See, for instance, Morehous 1969: 60, 69; Killion 1985; Tewodros 2010; Hanan 2011; ITUC 2011; 2014.

[64] Not only is this reflected in the scarcity of references to such harassment, but as will be made evident in Chapter 5, archival data suggests a sharp increase in harassment in connection with the fall of the government. This, however, is not to suggest that trade unions could operate freely during the PMAC/WPE period, but only when its operation was synchronised with the aims and goals of the regime. The reason to single out the period of stable PMAC/WPE rule here is to differentiate it from the contested first years of its rule, when systematic and mass repression was practiced, and its waning days, when labour trouble and repression reappeared (Beyene 2012).

legislation establishing only 'minimal' standards. For the over 100 000 plantation workers active in Humera, he claimed 'working and living conditions were extremely primitive', 'diseases such as malaria and elephantiasis' were 'rampant', and wages were frequently unpaid (Killion 1985: 538-539). Of 3000 unemployed persons 'rounded up' from the streets of Addis Ababa and airlifted to fill a labour shortage there in 1972, it was claimed that a full seventy percent had died a year later[65] (Killion 1985: 539). Bahru (2008: 120-146), meanwhile, described the appalling conditions on a major plantation owned by the Dutch company *Handelsvereniging Amsterdam* (HVA) – the Wonji-Shoa Sugar Estate – where racial discrimination, 'tyrannical' management practices, dangerous working conditions, shoddy medical facilities, and poor job security were compounding factors. In the industrial sector, labour conditions may not have been as bad as in the plantation economy – indeed, workers inside the Wonji sugar factory laboured under quite different conditions from those growing and cutting the sugar cane in the plantations – but a number of authors testify to the poor conditions prevailing there too. Bekure (1984) has characterised working and living conditions in industrial plants in Addis Ababa in the early-mid 1970s as 'intolerable'. Illustrating this point, he described how old machinery contributed to extreme noise, and poor air quality – where workers in textile and flour mills would be 'covered in cotton and fibre dust' (Bekure 1984: 614). He also discussed problems such as dirty and humid working environments, inhospitable temperatures, and the absence of enforcement of safety regulations. These problems, in turn, were found to be aggravated by a lack of proper medical care.

While the most extreme conditions may have lessened in intensity and frequency over the years, concerns over labour conditions are still being raised. The most recent ILO Decent Work Country Profile for Ethiopia cites a number of lingering problems. These include poor job quality and security; gendered discrimination; the prevalence of child labour; and – in the industrial sector – a high and increasing level of occupational injuries (ILO 2013). Compounding this problem, the labour inspectorate tasked with enforcing minimum standards suffers from severe capacity constraints and staff shortage. Assefa et al. (2016) also describe poor working conditions and employment quality in workplaces under study. In the expanding sector of commercial farming, Dessalegn (2011) found workers who 'felt they were unfairly treated, had no job security and [were] not infrequently abused'. For female workers, such abuse included physical abuse and

[65] Although this figure appears exaggerated it provides an indication of the kind of perceptions that have been dominant in the literature.

sexual harassment. In the thriving horticultural sector, Hanan's (2011) and Tewodros' (2010) findings corroborate these concerns. In addition to the prevalence of outright abuse, they describe working conditions in which a number of disquieting practices are prevalent. These include gender discrimination, compulsory and uncompensated overtime work, denial of leave rights, arbitrary wage deductions and payment delays, poor job security and disregard of legal stipulations, absence of sanitary facilities, lack of medical services, harassment and dismissal of trade union leaders, and lax safety standards. It is noteworthy that in a sector in which dangerous chemicals are prevalent, Tewodros (2010) found a sizeable number of respondents lacking the most basic protective clothing. But it is unlikely that outright dangerous labour conditions are confined to the horticultural sector. Blattman and Dercon (2016) offer a laundry list of health hazards reported by workers from across the diverse workplaces studied, corroborating the impression that the prevalence of such hazards constitutes the rule rather than the exception. All the above is taking place within an environment in which the government's 'relaxed attitude towards foreign investors regarding labour rights'[66] precludes it from consistently enforcing even the minimal legal safeguards established. A cavalier attitude towards upholding standards, and lack of enforcement of minimum rules and legislation, are consequently problems that have either persisted or reappeared through the decades.

3.3 Wage labour and manufacturing in the Ethiopian political economy

It has frequently been noted that both the extent of wage employment and the size of the manufacturing sector in Ethiopia have been and remain limited. This is essentially true. But at the same time, the importance of wage employment and the manufacturing is more important than sheer numbers would indicate. It is clear that the prioritised *ambition* of successive governments has been to develop the non-agrarian economy and intensify surplus extraction occurring through the wage mechanism. This ambition to develop manufacturing and wage employment is key to understand the conflicts that have arisen over wages and over the organisation of the waged workforce. It is underpinned by two factors. First – and in the current conjuncture probably less important than in the past – it rests on the view that this sector represents the 'modern' economy. Second, it emerges from the perspective that its dynamic qualities are required to increase productivity, close a constantly negative balance of trade, and absorb the surplus labour emerging

[66] Dereje Feyissa paraphrased in Dijkstra (2015).

from the stagnant agrarian sector. That this is the manner in which successive governments have viewed matters can be demonstrated with reference to successive development plans.

3.3.1 Plans and ambitions

In the Imperial Ethiopian Government's first *Five Year Development Plan* covering the years between 1957 and 1961, 'changes in the structure of employment' were envisaged, with the creation of 140 000 non-agrarian jobs – a significant number at the time – forecasted, and 'the most rapid increase of production' to be attained in industry (IEG 1957: 31). To this end, planned investments in manufacturing, mining and electricity dwarfed those in agriculture by a factor of 3.4 to 1. This sharply contrasts with the number of people employed in the respective sectors at the time, where the opposite held true by a ratio of 1 to 47 (IEG 1957: 6, 34)[67]. The second five-year development plan (IEG 1963b) maintained focus on infrastructural development and industrial growth. In terms of the agrarian sector, this plan brought about 'a shift in favour of agricultural modernisation… away from smallholder agriculture and in favour of mechanisation' (Dessalegn 2009: 50-51). Reflecting this, monetary investments assigned for commercial agriculture were five times higher than those assigned to peasant agriculture. The third and final five-year plan under imperial rule retained the bias favouring the manufacturing and wage employing sectors. It is notable that while agriculture was accorded primacy in the exposition, it was made clear that structural transformation away from agriculture remained 'a basic objective' of the plan (IEG 1968: 37, 182). Agriculture, despite its size, was assigned only about half of the funds assigned to manufacturing (IEG 1968: 50). Within agriculture, furthermore, it was commercial agriculture in general – and the waged sector of large-scale commercial farming in particular[68] – that was assigned the role of the motive force: commercial agricultural was set to

[67] If electricity is not included, the investments in manufacturing and mining were 2.3 times those assigned to agriculture. There is, however, two reasons to include investments in electricity as essentially geared towards industrial development. The first is that the provision of electricity, at the time, was almost entirely confined to urban areas. The second, and more important, is that investment in electricity was meant to enable the expansion of manufacturing, which was seriously hampered by shortages (IEG 1957: 98). More generally, it was assumed that 'the improvements in basic facilities will attract a larger flow of domestic and foreign capital into the productive sectors of the economy' (IEG 1957: 32). Such basic facilities additionally included investments in transport and communication, a post which alone was six times higher than that of agriculture. This post has, however, not been included in the calculation above, as it can plausibly be argued that investments in transport and communications – unlike electricity – is as important in stimulating markets for agricultural goods as those for manufacturing goods.

[68] Commercial farming was estimated to expand by 12.6 percent (IEG 1968: 201). 'The rapid development of commercial agriculture is the only way to get the relatively quick increase needed in agricultural exports', the plan stated (IEG 1968: 191). It was commercial farming, furthermore, that was to 'provide the dynamism necessary' to achieve the general agricultural growth goal (IEG 1968: 37).

grow at about 5.7 percent annually, while subsistence agriculture was estimated to grow at only the rate of 1.8 percent (IEG 1968: 44). Reflecting this order of priorities, large-scale commercial farming was assigned six times the budgeted expenditures of peasant farming (IEG 1968: 202). The latter was forecasted to grow only at a pace commensurate with population growth, so as not to trigger 'an uncontrolled exodus' from the sector (IEG 1968: 182). Nevertheless, it was manufacturing – estimated to grow at an annual rate of a full 15 percent – that was to produce the major source of expansion (IEG 1968: 227).

The post-revolutionary government retained a similar focus on manufacturing growth and large-scale mechanised farming as the previous. Its *Programme of the National Democratic Revolution* (PMGE 1976) established the development of industry – 'a prerequisite for a strong national economy' – and the development of large-scale state-owned farms as prioritised tasks. More emphatically put, 'it is only with industrialisation that a strong and free economy can be built' the chairman of the WPE (Mengistu 1984: 33) stated at the founding congress of the party. In the only ten-year plan initiated by the party – which was not to be completed – manufacturing remained a top priority. Industry, it stated, 'as the motive power for achieving economic development, will increasingly play a greater and leading role in the national economy' (PMGSE 1984: 20). Since industrial production was rather limited, it was considered 'imperative that much greater investments [was to] be made in this sector' to ensure that the structural transformation of the economy was achieved (PMGSE 1984: 20). Within the time frame of the plan, it was estimated that industrial output would nearly triple, while agriculture was only expected to grow at an annual rate of 4.3 percent (PMGSE 1984: 24). Again, it was a form of agriculture reliant on wage labour that was made key to achieving even that modest figure: that of state farms. To achieve these goals, it was planned that between 4.3 and 5.7 billion ETB would be invested in manufacturing during the plan period, while 1.3 billion ETB was to be invested in the state farm sector. These figures assume meaning and strongly indicate the hierarchy of priorities when compared to the meagre 1.5 billion ETB that was assigned to crop production in the peasant sub-sector, which encompassed the labour of over 80 percent of the population (PMGSE 1984: 37, 61, 74, 69).

With the coming to power of the EPRDF in 1991, there was, initially, a reprioritisation in favour of peasant agriculture. This took the form of an agricultural development led-industrialisation strategy, in which increasing agrarian incomes were expected to result in increasing rural demand

for industrial products. However, that the ultimate goal of this this endogenous and demand-led model was manufacturing growth is clear from the name. Over the years, and through consecutive national plans[69], the goal of achieving structural transformation and industrial growth has taken on an increasing level of importance and urgency. This has culminated in the ambition, not only to build 'an industrial sector that plays a leading role in the economy' (MoFED 2006: 44) and to construct 'a light manufacturing hub in Africa' (MoFED 2016: 82), but even for Ethiopia to become 'one of the leaders in overall manufacturing globally' (MoFED 2016: 78). In practice the focus on peasant agriculture and internal demand has given way to an external-oriented industrialisation model[70], combined with a newfound desire to attract investments in large-scale commercial agriculture.

A factor that unites these aspect of the economic strategy is that their implementation exert downward pressure on real wages. In the first instance, the relative appreciation of agrarian prices raises the cost of living for wage earners and thus depresses real wages. In the second instance, the pressure on wages is direct, as low wages are the means by which low productivity can be offset, improving the competitiveness of Ethiopian manufacturing in international markets. That this is the manner in which policymakers understand the model can be illustrated by a few examples. Take, for example, the statement of the prime minister of the FDRE and chairman of the EPRDF that 'in Ethiopia, to achieve our advantage in light manufacturing, we have kept [labour] costs low… we have to start with low-cost, labour intensive and low-technology solutions' (Mills 2016), or his exhortation that 'this generation has to sacrifice to bring productivity up' (Jobson and Norbrook 2014). What this sacrifice entails is made clear in State Minister Abraham Tekeste's avowal that Ethiopians can 'really save and postpone consumption'[71] (Fortin 2016). The most explicit and official confirmation of this understanding, however, can be found in the most recent overall development plan – the second *Growth and Transformation Plan*, operational between 2015 and 2020. It not only notes and vows to take advantage of 'low wages' to achieve

[69] See MoFED 2002; 2006; 2010; 2016.

[70] According to Arkebe Oqubay (2015: 92), a high level government official, Ethiopian industrial policy is premised on an export-led orientation, as derived from the East Asian experience. Arkebe (2015: 84-85) states that in 2012 the Development Bank of Ethiopia (DBE) awarded two-thirds of all loans to the manufacturing sector, and less than a quarter to agriculture. This reflects DBE having been 'brought into line with government priorities'.

[71] Saving, in this context, does not refer to individual bank account savings. Bank deposit rates have systematically been set lower than inflation over the last several decades, discouraging such savings. Savings must here instead be understood as the generation of investible surpluses, as consumption is 'postponed' to future generations.

manufacturing growth, but it further sets out that 'close monitoring' is required to ensure that 'real wages do not exceed productivity growth' (MoFED 2016: 106, 138).

Moving to the second factor underpinning the ambition to develop manufacturing and wage employment, the issue of surplus accumulation comes to the fore. From a political-economic perspective, it is obvious that increasing surpluses cannot indefinitely be carved out of a peasant population cultivating a fixed amount of land. Surplus accumulation on an expanded scale requires a more dynamic setting than that. Furthermore, since the land reform of 1975, and the subsequent abolishment of the AMC and of required quotas, what surplus is extracted from the peasantry has been relaxed. This has ironically, but logically, resulted in in efforts to intensify surplus extraction and accumulation from wage labour and in the non-peasant economy – initially under the aegis of the state. The programme of the WPE (1984a: 70-71) stated that 'since the effort to boost domestic accumulation in the current context is largely a question of increasing the state budget [and] since the major sources of accumulation are the production, distribution and service enterprises under state control, appropriate measures will be taken to raise ... their profitability'. In its economic guidelines (WPE 1984b: 113-114) it sets the aim to 'double the rate of capital accumulation', through, among other things, 'reductions in costs and increases in productivity of public enterprises'. The elevated ambition of the current government to ensure that larger surpluses are extracted from a developing low-waged manufacturing sector, meanwhile, has already been evidenced.

3.3.2 Outcomes

Efforts and ambitions aside, however, whether the plans have resulted in successful outcomes is another question. Balance of trade data[72] implies that the answer in terms of surplus accumulation is probably negative. In terms of expansion of the manufacturing sector, and wage labour more generally, there have already been some indications as to what the evidence of the trajectory is. It is probably not too farfetched to state that the high expectations have generally not been met.

[72] The current balance of trade gap, where total export value account for less than 16 percent of imports (Dawit 2016), seems to suggest that infusion of external capital – through FDI, loans, remittances, or external aid – is, at the very least in the contemporary period, a necessary substitute for the successful generation of surpluses in the domestic productive sectors. In this regard, it should be noted that the WPE's Ten-Year Prospective Plan too was overwhelmingly reliant on high levels – 22.7 billion ETB, measuring just over half of total estimated investment (PMGSE 1984: 25-26) – of funding expected to be mobilised from foreign sources.

Nevertheless, the history of Ethiopian manufacturing and wage employment is one of intermittent, slow, yet steady expansion.

Industrial manufacturing in Ethiopia is, with a few notable exceptions, a post-liberation[73] phenomenon. Although 83 industrial establishment were registered as operational at the end of the 1940s[74] (Eshetu 2004: 33), it was only in the 1950s that the push for industrial development began in earnest. Between 1950 and 1957 manufacturing output more than tripled (Eshetu 2004: 35), and during the period of the first five-year development plan, which lasted until 1961, it continued to grow rapidly. During the period of the second five-year plan, between 1962 and 1968, the size of the sector again almost doubled (Assefa and Eshetu 1969: 50). Extensive incentives to foreign and local investors, high protective barriers for domestic producers, and large infusions of state investment spurred the sector during this phase of expansion. However, constraints soon came to limit the expansion, including sharply declining investments and a relatively saturated home market. During the period of the third five-year plan, lasting until 1973, the manufacturing growth rate declined, from an annual rate of 14.5 percent over the span of the two previous plans to a more modest annual pace of 8 percent, and in the year leading up to the revolution it actually reversed into decline (Eshetu 2004: 47). In the seventeen years of PMAC/WPE rule that followed, manufacturing would continue to grow at a sluggish pace, only increasing in terms of GDP share as a result of the catastrophic performance of the agricultural sector. With the coming to power of EPRDF in 1991, the sector initially suffered from the removal of protection and relative disfavour, and its share in the national economy came to diminish. However, as of the early 2000s, a new push for industrial development and search for investible capital has commenced. This has, as noted above, come to result in a developmental strategy premised on structural transformation and rapid manufacturing growth. Partly reflecting the priority awarded to the sector, investments have again began to increase.

Despite the growing absolute size of the sector measured in output, its share of the value of gross domestic production has remained low. In fact, several accounts appear to suggest that its relative contribution to GDP has actually decreased over the decades. According to one estimate, manufacturing contributed an average of just below ten percent between 1974/75 and 1982/83, out

[73] In the Ethiopian context, liberation refers to the 1941 end of Italian occupation.
[74] These generously included flour mills and sawmills.

of which medium and large scale enterprises contributed around half (Eshetu 2004: 156). By 1984, this figure had reached eleven percent (PMGSE 1984: 11), contracting to eight percent in 1990, and seven percent in 2001 (EEA/EEDRI: 2005) In 2014/15, as the government prepared its most recent plan to boost the sector, it stood at a meagre 4.8 percent of GDP, most glaringly exposing to what limited extent prior plans for the sector have succeeded.

Potential crippling/retarding factors are too plenty and diverse to be conclusively listed here, but some of those which have been most frequently cited over the years (Eshetu 2004; Mulatu and Yohannis 1988; World Bank 2015; Arkebe 2015; EEA/EEDRI: 2005) include war; demand-sided and supply-sided problems, including the weak demand generated by a poor and subsistence producing peasantry and a lack of investible surpluses; a constrained domestic private sector; shortage of inputs, weak internal linkages, and over-reliance on imported inputs; lack of skilled technical and managerial staff; low productivity and low technological capabilities; poor infrastructure; excessive protectionism for prolonged periods; and – curiously for an economy in which the abundance of cheap labour is consistently cited as an exploitable endowment – a very high level of capital intensity[75].

The composition of the sector has remained fairly stable over the years. Textile, food processing and beverages have remained the overwhelmingly largest subsectors. The industries, furthermore, have been geographically concentrated to the Addis Ababa – Djibouti railway axis[76], in addition to Asmara during the period that Eritrea was a province of the country. Ownership patterns, meanwhile, have changed over the years. During the imperial regime, a dominant part of the manufacturing sector was foreign-owned (Mulatu 1990). This was augmented by a not insignificant state-owned sector and a minor domestic private sector. After the nationalisations by PMAC, however, the state took over the dominant role, with state-owned enterprises accounting for no less than 94.5 percent of both capital and output in 1984 (PMGSE 1984: 63). Privatisation of many state-owned enterprises and trickling new private investment flows since the coming to

[75] See World Bank (2015: 26), where the Ethiopian manufacturing sector is found to be a full six times as capital intensive as that of Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire. While the practice of 'stuffing' manufacturing enterprises during the PMAC/WPE period slightly reduced relative capital intensity, this has constituted a persistent feature of the sector, probably, in part, arising from an incentive structure oddly favouring the import and deployment of capital goods.

[76] In fact, along this axis, industries developed almost exclusively in and around one cluster stretching south from Addis Ababa to the nearby city of Nazret (contemporary Adama) and one cluster around the railway hub city Dire Dawa.

power of EPRDF has reverted the structure into one in which private[77] ownership is again dominant, and foreign ownership increasingly important. A not insignificant part of the sector, however, remains under state ownership.

3.3.3 The wage workers

Employment numbers reflect the slow, uneven, but continuous growth of the manufacturing sector. CSA[78] data suggests the development from a baseline of 15 000 workers employed in manufacturing in 1955; to 33 000 in 1963; 49 000 in 1968; 59 000 in 1975; 91 000 in 1985; 90 000 in 1995; 118 000 in 2005; and 173 000 in 2010. It should be noted, with regards to these numbers, that the rapid increase between 1975 and 1985 can be attributed to the practice of 'stuffing'[79] during the PMAC/WPE period. The stagnation in the ten years that followed 1985 can be attributed to retrenchments and hiring hiatus associated with, first, attempt to cut costs and boost profitability during the late PMAC/WPE period and early EPRDF period, and, second, with privatisation in the early 1990s. Furthermore, it should be added that while Eritrea, a relatively densely populated and economically advanced region, was included in the statistics from the 1950s onwards, its contribution was removed in the early 1990s, as the former province gained independence. Finally, it is important to recognise that the figures above pertains only to the manufacturing subsector of industrial employment, which additionally includes the larger subsector of construction and that of mining. The expansion of manufacturing employment in the last ten years, however, seems to constitute a break with the pattern of sluggish growth. In 2014/15 the number of employed reached 380 000, and within the current Growth and Transformation Plan II, it is envisaged to grow to encompass 758 000 workers in 2019/20 (MoFED 2016: 138).

Not all wage work, of course, takes place in the manufacturing sector. In Ethiopia, public employment in the non-productive sectors – civil service, military, police etc. – has always constituted the lion's share of such employment. The service sector is also a notable source of wage employment, and as has been indicated in the above, agricultural labour, including that in commercial agriculture, has constituted another major source. Where commercial agriculture ends

[77] This includes a number of endowment funds established by constituent EPRDF parties.
[78] Compiled from the range of Statistical Abstract published annually (for some years biannually) by Ethiopia's Central Statistical Agency since 1963.
[79] See Mulatu (1990), who probably coined the term, referring to the expansion of employment in order to meet social ends rather than productivity targets. The term, accidental or not, appears more appropriate than the term 'overstaffing', which indicates that there is a given appropriate level.

and agro-industry begins is not clearly demarcated. Nevertheless, some indicative figures can serve to illustrate the magnitude of employment within this sector too. Dessalegn (2009: 92), for example, estimates that during peak seasons a full 125 000 workers were employed on commercial farms and plantations in the Awash Valley alone in the early 1970s, although all may not have been paid monetary wages. It is equally difficult to disaggregate the estimate of the 350 000 people thought to have been employed in mechanised agriculture between owner/farmers, out-growers and paid labourers (Dessalegn 2009: 97-98), but it serves to illuminate the size of the workforce in the sector. During the PMAC/WPE era in particular, this source of employment was largely replaced by state farms. In 1985 such farms employed 85 000 people, including seasonal workers (Gebru 1995: 273). The total number of people engaged in wage work has not been consistently measured. But here too a trajectory of slow, fluctuating, but recently accelerating pace of growth is discernible[80]. Its most recent spurt has seen the CSA figure of waged employees grow from 2.5 million to 4.3 million between 2005 and 2013 alone.

The social make-up of the waged workforce is as diverse as the multinational polity. However, early wage labour was most enthusiastically taken up by populations from the south-western part of the country where population density and land alienation had created a larger pool of available labour, and where tax and tribute demands had made cash incomes needed. For this reason, wage labour was early on associated with nationalities such as the Gurage, Sidama, Kambata, Welayta, and Oromo. This was reinforced by a deep-rooted cultural aversion to non-agrarian and non-military labour among the northern 'core' nationalities, and the particular geographic pattern of capitalist penetration[81] (Killion 1985; Pankhurst 1968). Over time, however, the significance of this factor receded. Contemporary wage labour is extensively mobilised from all national groups[82]. Because of past geographical concentration of schools, discriminatory practices and resultant differences in educational attainment, managerial staff has disproportionally tended to be recruited from the northern nationalities and from the former central province of Shoa. With the expansion

[80] The outlines of this trajectory has been sketched in Admasie (2015).

[81] 'The geographical proximity of various ethnic groups to areas of urban and industrial development was crucial in establishing specific patterns of working class recruitment' Killion (1985: 142) has written. 'Before… 1935 almost all capitalist investments in the region occurred outside of the Abyssinian highlands. In this way, the impact of the imperial conquest on workers' recruitment from the conquered territories was reinforced by the pattern of capitalist penetration'.

[82] The possible exception here may be the inhabitants of the FDRE's 'emerging' regional states and the predominantly pastoral nationalities. Their proportionally lesser engagement in manufacturing, at the very least, could plausibly be explained by the meagre amount of manufacturing establishments located in those regional states.

of the educational system, and the abatement of discrimination there are reasons to assume that this tendency too has receded in importance. Finally, a gendered division of labour is evident within the wage labouring population. In the textile manufacturing and horticultural sectors for example, this is evidenced by a pre-dominant female workforce, but a predominantly male managerial staff.

So far only a schematic discussion on the political-economic context has been undertaken. Only the size and contours of the make-up, moreover, of the waged workforce has been discussed. To understand the position of wage labour within the Ethiopian political economy, a number of other factors must be discussed in more detail, including that of the agency of workers. In the next chapters, it is this agency that is the subject of attention.

4. Organisation, movement and orientation: first cycle

In this chapter a first cycle of contested advance and retreat of the Ethiopian labour movement, and a correspondent growth and decline in the assertiveness of its orientation, is discussed and analysed. This cycle stretches over a period ranging from the early 1960s – when the movement emerged as a country-wide force – to the end of the 1970s. It includes the conjuncture that resulted in the Ethiopian revolution, breaking out in 1974, and its aftermath in the years that followed. The chapter consists of two overarching parts. The most extensive part, covering the first six sections, consists of a chronological exposition, where special attention is paid to key conjunctures. This discussion is based on data from a number of primary sources, complemented by references to the secondary literature. Throughout the exposition factors that that were conducive or constraining to the growth of assertiveness constitute areas of attention. However, these factors are discussed and analysed in more detail and in a cross-temporal manner in the last two sections.

4.1 Emergence and early times

The Ethiopian labour movement emerged around the break between the 1950s and 1960s, stimulated by a number of factors. Railway workers of the *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer Franco-Ethiopien* (CFE), who operated the Djibouti-Addis Ababa line, had been the first to organise. European workers of the company, with prior experience of organisation had set up a first workers' organisation and staged strikes in the years immediately following the First World War. But it was only in the aftermath of Italian occupation that Ethiopian workers came to play a leading role, and in 1947 CFE workers staged the first large-scale Ethiopian-led strike. Another early stimuli came from dock- and maritime workers in the port of Djibouti, who established a number of organisations and engaged in collective action and bargaining. The organised workers on the Djiboutian section of the railroad – which was separately administered from the Ethiopian section – won concessions that significantly improved their conditions compared to those of the workers on the Ethiopian section of the line, demonstrating the potential benefits of labour movementism. However, of more direct importance for the emergence of the Ethiopian labour movement was the experience of trade unionism in Eritrea, a territory which was federated with – and later incorporated into – the Ethiopian Empire in 1952. Prior to the federation, the British military administration of the territory passed a relatively generous labour law permitting workers to organise. Owing to guarantees offered at the time of incorporation, this law was initially respected

by the Ethiopian government, and organised labour, while banned in Ethiopia proper, continued to be permitted in Eritrea. The Eritrean labour movement was relatively small and urban. By 1958 the Confederation of Free Eritrean Labour Unions (CFELU) incorporated some 10 000 workers (Stutz 1967: 112). However, although grudgingly tolerated, Ethiopian authorities were uneasy with its existence, which threatened to spark both imitative practices among workers in Ethiopia proper and centrifugal political mobilisation in Eritrea. The emerging link between Eritrean and Ethiopian workers at this conjuncture, and the inspiration the former exercised on the latter, can be illustrated by the manner in which a strike of Eritrean dockworkers in Massawa and Assab in 1954 was immediately followed by a strike of Ethiopian workers on the Ethio-Djiboutian railway. In 1958 the situation in Eritrea came to a head when the CFELU staged a general strike. Repression followed, claiming the lives of 'scores' of strikers and protesters (Killion 1985: 378)[83]. In the aftermath the confederation was banned and its offices closed. Although the organisational structures were thus rendered defunct, the ideas propelling collective organisation had taken root among Eritrean workers. By means of inspiration and social intercourse those ideas were to spread further south. Meanwhile, southward labour migration, particularly in the waged sectors where labour movementism in Ethiopia proper was about to emerge in earnest, provided the emerging Ethiopian labour movement with an infusion of workers with organisational experience.

By the end of the 1950s, the objective conditions for the emergence of an Ethiopian labour movement had ripened, as developmental efforts had created a mass of wage labourers capable of sustaining an economy-wide movement. The conditions under which these workers entered wage employment created immediate frictions. Meanwhile, local initiatives reinforced external stimuli in indicating the feasibility of collective action. Mutual aid associations in urban areas – *iddirs* – had for decades been a feature among the emerging urban populations in Ethiopia. These organisations, however, were generally limited in scope to providing assistance to its members in times of extraordinary stress – most typically in the organisation of burials. In the 1940s and 1950s, however, workplace *iddirs* began to be formed by industrial workers in a number of establishments (Killion 1985: 441-448). The scope of activities of the early workers' associations was limited to collective self-help and petitioning. Yet, in autonomously organising workers they carried the seed of what was to evolve into the Ethiopian labour movement. Initial attempts to sway the workplace

[83] The official figure of casualties was, according to the same author (1985: 379), 535 wounded and 9 killed.

power balance included ‘many instances where workers simply joined together and, with a flag waving, marched to the palace to submit their petition in the form of complaints’ (Syoum 2005: 17). Eventually, and where the conditions permitted, workers' associations turned into unions in all but name, and some of them – such as that at the HVA Wonji-Shoa sugar factory – came to stage successful strikes. This, in turn, propelled an intensified process where associations ‘sprouted up all over the empire’ (Syoum 2005: 27). With the genie out of the bottle, workers' associations multiplied, and strikes – hitherto a very rare and limited phenomenon – became frequent.

Meanwhile, a cooperative forum for workers associations around Addis Ababa had been formed under the auspices of the workers' association of the Ethio-fibre Factory, and its chairman Aberra Gemu. In 1962, this forum was to form an umbrella organisation comprising twenty workers' association – the Ethiopian Labour Union (ELU). Although there was no a legal basis for its registration, and its application for registration therefore ignored[84], the existence of an emerging centre was tolerated by the imperial government as the lesser of evils. A high imperial official would tell a visiting representative of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) that the government was aware of the ‘growing agitations among the workers who had staged several down-tools and walk-out actions recently’. The official disclosed that a ‘good number’ of workers' organisations had already been established, and that ‘some of them had already started creating trouble with employers’, including strikes. This concern, he admitted, was magnified by the fact that ‘workers went on strike without [first] discussing with the employers their grievances’, and by a fear that ‘communist elements’ existed among the workers. Another high official of the Ministry of National Community Development's (MNCD) Labour Department concurred that ‘the existing workers organisations were now growing into restless movements’. Because the government ‘was worried about the possible consequences of such illegal and “unwarranted” actions’, the ICFTU representative reported, it would speed up the passing of legislation regulating the formation and operation of trade unions. ‘The problem of establishing trade unions and grievance and negotiating machineries had become acute and the government was eager to get things done as quickly as possible’, the ICFTU representative concluded (Claverie

[84] ‘The essence of your request is equality of master and servant’, a letter from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (which, according to the 1944 Factories Proclamation, was the body responsible for industrial relations) stated dismissively (Zack 1967). Stutz (1967: 37), however, claims that the Ministry of Interior accepted the application for registration, but he seems to be alone in suggesting this. Whichever way, its existence was now tolerated if not explicitly recognised.

1962a). The legalisation of trade unionism in Ethiopia was thus precipitated by urgent pressures asserted by the emergent labour movement, and its permission was based on the expressed calculation that official trade unionism would stem the growing level of restiveness.

The heightened activity among workers and 'the growing number of industrial disputes' (Zack 1967), was reinforced by external pressures in convincing the state of the implausibility of ignoring the problem. In most newly independent African states, trade unions were not only permitted, but often important allies of ruling parties. As Addis Ababa was the selected capital of the Organisation of African Unity, and as Ethiopia was a member of the ILO, the absence of a national trade union centre posed a problem to the international image the imperial government wanted to project. Internally, moreover, a 1960 coup attempt had exposed the political fragility of the imperial regime, and made it more susceptible to pressure in favour of liberalisation. These factors reinforced the pressure from workers to force a change in official attitude, and a labour proclamation was finally issued in 1962. The proclamation permitted the registration of unions and in March 1963 the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU) was formed.

Right from the outset, the emergent movement was beset by a number of problems. As noted in the previous chapter, the labour proclamation barred large sections of the workforce from organising, including agricultural workers and civil servants. Meanwhile, the effective ban on unionism in Eritrea remained in force until 1966. Funds, moreover, were scarce, especially in terms of what unions could afford to share with the national centre. Size was another constraining factor. It was a relatively small confederation that came into existence: only 15 000 workers were members in in April 1963 (Emmanuel 1977: 65). However, this did not prevent the imperial state from closely monitoring the movement, and enforcing control at the level it was most cost-effective: the central leadership.

The limits to CELU's autonomy were soon to be demarcated by the state. Within a year of its formation, the leadership – headed by HVA labour leader Abraham Mekonnen – had become impatient with the lack of progress in addressing concerns it had raised. Such concerns included the state's failure to safeguard rights established in the labour proclamation, the disregard for persistent harassment and dismissals of union representatives[85], and the increasing backlog of

[85] Killion (1985: 465) discusses the repression of a number of unions in the intervening time.

matters referred to the Labour Relations Board (LRB), which meant that workers whose rights had been violated were left indefinitely suspended. In order to force a resolution of these problems, CELU threatened to call a general strike. This constituted an intolerable act of insubordination, and the imperial government immediately moved to force a change in leadership, threatening the dissolution of the young confederation (Robinson 1963). As a result, Abraham Mekonnen resigned and Aberra Gemu was found shot to death[86]. According to confidential government communication to the ICFTU, the importance attached to having Abraham Mekonnen removed was not only motivated by his role in the strike threat. Rather, he was also accused of having contacts with 'various Eastern countries', and had discussed funding a literacy campaign with Soviet and Yugoslav officials (Robinson 1963). Whatever the precise reasons prompting the purge, 'the illusion of CELU's autonomy was destroyed' (Killion 1985: 467-468). From this point on, Dessalegn (2002: 114) has argued, 'the leadership knew that the threat of violent suppression was always hanging over its head', as the imperial government continued to keep a watchful eye over its activities.

While the strike threat had notified both the government and workers of the movement's potential power, in the process attracting new members (Zack 1965: 36), it had come at a price. It was a deferential leadership that replaced Abraham Mekonnen's, careful about retaining amicable relations with the state and employers. Indeed, many years later a Federation of Ethiopian Employers (FEE) official could congratulate the federation on 'always [having] enjoyed excellent relationships and understanding with both the government and CELU' (Syoum 2005: 83). Heading CELU's new leadership was Beyene Solomon, a unionist and former shoe factory worker from Eritrea, who represented no constituent union of CELU. Beyene surrounded himself with a number of freshly graduated staff members, from whom several were eventually brought into top leadership position in the confederation. Much like Beyene they represented no basic unions, but unlike him they also had no real experience of being wage workers. It has been alleged – even by sympathetic observers – that these staffers had little contact with workers, but aimed 'only to develop a new labour profession', and 'tended to use their positions within CELU as a spring board for career development' (Syoum 2005: 64; Seleshi 1979: 689, 698). These allegations would repeatedly be asserted in the conflicts that developed within CELU. Because CELU employees

[86] Whether Aberra Gemu was assassinated or committed suicide has been a matter of debate. In Killion's (1985: 467) assessment 'the cause of his death was state repression', either way.

were initially banned from standing for election, however, the confederation's statures had to be revised to permit their eventual elevation, and as Beyene and his staffers' influence increased they were amended accordingly.

CELU's new leaders enjoyed a level of official tolerance that had eluded their predecessors and they earned it by supressing radical impulses within the movement. The machinations that the leadership was ready to employ to this end is illustrated by Beyene's criticism of Abraham Mekonnen's decision to allow a vote on the 1963 strike threat: despite a majority of workers' representatives supporting it, Beyene had, self-admittedly, preferred to reject the issue on procedural grounds, or subvert with delaying tactics. Abraham, Beyene (2010: 72) stated, 'should have handled the matter more delicately… he was in error when he asked all workers for a vote [and] could have easily evaded the problem by saying that he needed to study the complaint first or something to that effect'. Such stalling tactics and procedural manipulation would be employed whenever the leadership was seriously challenged. But through its deferentialism, and the bureaucratic subversions it deployed, the leadership 'alienated a significant [section] of the workers', and eventually came to cause 'a rift in the Ethiopian labour movement' (Emmanuel 1977: 66-67).

4.2 External influences and the emergence of a labour bureaucracy

The new leadership was rewarded for its efforts with a number of perks that came with holding high office. ICFTU documents reveal that as early as 1963, the *monthly* salary of the CELU president was 600 Ethiopian Birr (ETB)[87], while that of the general secretary was 450 ETB[88] (Robinson 1963). This amounted to a *yearly* salary of a very well-paid worker[89]. In his

[87] While Ethiopian currency has been known as Birr in Amharic since its introduction, it was translated as Ethiopian Dollars until 1975, when ETB was adopted as its name in English too. Since the Ethiopian Dollar was shifted to Birr at an equal rate, and for the purpose of simplification, the abbreviation ETB is used throughout this text.

[88] In a report by ICFTU representative Robinson (1963) it is stated that 'the president and general secretary agreed to draw only one-half of their salaries until the Confederation is in a better financial position'. However, only a few months later, this commitment was omitted from a funding requests (Beyene 1963b). In fact, the monthly salary of the president had now been increased to 650 ETB. In addition, a dozen other salaries are mentioned in 1964, including monthly 400 to an education officer; 300 to an organiser; and 300 to a typist (Becu 1964). The size of this representative and non-representative layer of relatively well-paid FTOs and staffers was only to continue to increase in the decade that followed. By 1965 the number of FTOs had reached four, and the number of officials had reached six, and in November of that year, at least 13 paid positions are mentioned (CELU 1965). At the ninth anniversary of the organisation, Beyene (1972) reported no less than 50 'permanent employees and advisors', in addition to the FTOs.

[89] In fact, a monthly wage of 25-30 Ethiopian Birr was not uncommon to workers at the time. See Chapter 6 for a discussion on average wages.

autobiography, Beyene (2010: 174) mentions having possessed a villa, two cars, a film projector, and a gun during the time of his incumbency. This would have put his income far beyond the range of the earnings of regular workers at the time. Indeed, by the time the leadership was ousted, Beyene and his closest lieutenant Fissehatsion Tekie each had a regular salary from CELU over fourteen times as high as that of some regular staff employed by the confederation (CELU 1974c). And the salary constituted only one aspect of the many perks available[90]. The ICFTU archives contains uncountable invitations for and requests from CELU's top officials to visit the ICFTU and its member federations in Europe and America, as well as funding opportunities for studies and training programmes abroad – with generous *per diem* payments. These opportunities were clearly quite attractive – in the ICFTU representative's assessment, high CELU officials displayed an 'eagerness to get every possible chance to travel abroad'[91] (Kindström 1967b). However, in addition to such material incentives, social elevation was another aspect of occupying high positions within the labour movement. In his memoirs Beyene (2010) recounts of rubbing shoulders with ministers, international officialdom, ambassadors, and the economic elite of Ethiopian society of the time. Beyene and CELU's General Secretary Fissehatsion Tekie also came to occupy senior official positions in ICFTU's African Regional Organisation, and Beyene was made a board member and vice president of ICFTU, and a deputy to the ILO Governing Body (Voice of Labour 1973a: 29). The manner in which top CELU officials had been co-opted into an elite circle of international labour officialdom was also made evident by their treatment after their eventual ouster.

Right from the beginning, then, the top office-holders of the Ethiopian labour movement were subject to external influence. For its first long decade, such influence mainly came from the western-aligned and anti-communist international trade union movement, embodied in the ICFTU. Early influence can be illustrated by the fact that CELU's first constitution was drafted by ICFTU affiliates before CELU's founding conference, and that this conference was held immediately after and in the same venue as a preparatory training workshop organised by the latter (Killion 1986:

[90] According to former CELU employee Emmanuel Fayessa Negassa (1983, interview with Tom Killion), other carrots extended by the government included duty free privileges and funded 'travel at will'. But it also included sticks, in terms of threat and surveillance. Emmanuel further claims that government stipends for salaries to CELU constituted another control mechanism, but notes that the CELU leaders were unwilling to admit this.

[91] Attractive opportunities to travel abroad was used in order to reward loyalists and punish unionist deemed disloyal. According to CELU's oppositional movement 'cronies' and people without connection to the labour movement were sent abroad due to this practice (Disaffiliated unions 1973).

460; Syoum 2005: 50-53). In fact, ICFTU representatives were so certain of their leverage that they could dictate provisions in CELU's constitution that '*should*' be included (ICFTU 1963; Nedzynski 1963b). CELU applied for affiliation with ICFTU immediately after its establishment, and it became a full affiliate on January 1, 1964.

For CELU, relations with ICFTU provided access to funds, transfers of skills, and an international affiliation that could provide a certain level of protection against state encroachment. Financial support was particularly important considering CELU's poor internal finances (Voice of Labour 1970: 17; Seleshi 1970: 689). CELU's leadership, moreover, was apt at exploiting funds provided by the ICFTU and allies to its best advantage. However, CELU came to grow more dependent on the ICFTU than what the latter was comfortable with. At the outset of the relationship the assistant general secretary of ICFTU had written that 'it is hoped that we can avoid, as a matter of principle, the payment of officers' salaries and rent', as 'our payment of officers' salaries interrupts [the development of good trade unionists] and thus, in many cases would provide a trade union elite whom, in the final analysis may not have the support of the workers' (Nedzynski 1963a). These concerns, however prescient they proved to be, were soon expediently overlooked in the face of pressing needs and innumerable requests for assistance from Addis Ababa. Not only was responsibility for the salaries of the leadership, support staff and field staff accepted, but an annual grant from the ICFTU International Solidarity Fund (ISF) was regularised. Between 1964 and 1970, this did not amount to less than 16 00 US Dollars per year, before tailing to 10 000 in 1971, 11 000 in 1972, 6 000 in 1973, and 3 500 in 1974[92]. In addition to such support, CELU managed to acquire substantial additional funds for organisational efforts and literacy campaigns, purchase of vehicles and property, and contingent expenses of all sorts. The ICFTU was not alone in supporting CELU financially, but a host of other international allies in the 'free' trade union movement that clustered in Addis Ababa provided additional assistance, including the AFL-CIO affiliated African-American Labor Centre (AALC) the Danish *Landsorganisationen*, and, for some time, the Friedrich Ebert *Stiftung* (FES). The AALC, for example, funded the construction of a new headquarter building. Upon leaving the country in the aftermath of the 1974 revolution, its representative reported that it had expended no less than 1 600 000 US Dollars supporting CELU over the previous decade (Kailembo 1974). To get a flavour of the relative importance of

[92] These figures are taken from the yearly ISF allocation decisions, available in the ICFTU archives.

such funding, CELU's statement of income, expenditure and balance for 1969 shows that out of a total income of 140 000 Ethiopian Dollars, 38 000 originated from ICFTU assistance, 54 000 from the AALC, and only 47 000 – quite precisely a third – consisted of funds generated by CELU itself (CELU 1969). This did not prevent CELU from submitting annual requests much in abundance of the regularised ICFTU contribution, and to voice indignation when these were not fully met (de Jonge 1964).

The administration of support funds left a lot of leeway. So, for instance, could Beyene informally ask the ICFTU representative for disbursement of ISF funds for an opaque project he was personally leading in Eritrea, without clarifying the nature of expenses (Kindström 1966b). Neither the CELU board nor the ICFTU had been informed about the costs, nor received 'any real information about his activity in Eritrea' the ICFTU representative reported. On noticing hesitation Beyene explained that his reason 'for not giving clear information to the members of the CELU board of his work in Eritrea was that some board members were against any activity in Eritrea'. In another instance Beyene argued that 'he would rather use the monthly ETB 1000 to help [former president Abraham Makonnen]' than the organisational support it was intended for. Although the latter suggestion was not met with approval of the funders, they nevertheless stepped in and awarded an extra contribution to meet Beyene's demands (de Jonge 1964). The lack of transparency in the usage of funds was not confined to the top level, but was an issue that caused problems and frictions throughout structures of the labour movement. Many of the conflicts that developed within CELU – from the central level to that of constituent unions – were marked by allegations of improper use of funds.

ICFTU support came at another cost. In return for its assistance, ICFTU demanded an unflinching commitment to anti-radicalism, and a level of exclusivity that permitted no contacts whatsoever with the federations organised in the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). In fact, archival documents make it abundantly clear how the ICFTU, the AALC, and its allies viewed their engagement with CELU as 'extremely important' in assuring that the Ethiopian labour movement 'does not follow the course of our "eastern competitors"' (Schirrmacher 1961; ICFTU 1962). 'The urgency', wrote ICFTU General Secretary Omer Becu to the president of AFL-CIO in 1964, 'lies also in the fact that the very success so far of CELU has attracted the notice of communist embassies and other anti-free trade union forces, who are only too eager to gain a foothold within

CELU'. The role of ICFTU and AFL-CIO, he argued, was 'to bar the way' to such forces. 'I have been vigilant in watching the prime factors in the trade union movement whether they have any underground truck with direct or indirect totalitarian forces', reported ICFTU representative Ramanjuam in 1963, reflecting this order of priorities.

The mechanisms by which adherence to 'free' and 'democratic' trade unionism – meaning anti-communist, ICFTU-affiliated, anti-radical business unionism – was policed included continuous supervision. Lennart Kindström, the ICFTU representative to Ethiopia, was stationed within the offices of CELU (Beyene 2010: 85), from where he could closely follow the confederation's operations and its officers' movements. His correspondence reveals a great deal about the relationship between CELU, ICFTU and the rest of the 'free' trade union movement. Travels of CELU leaders to 'suspect' countries and contacts with trade unionists from outside the 'free' trade union movement was monitored, reported, and constituted a source of repeated exasperation among ICFTU representatives and officials. In 1966, for example, having been informed that CELU's secretary general had attended and given a speech at a WFTU meeting in Budapest, the ICFTU representative in Ethiopia was ordered to intervene. In response, Kindström (1967b) disparagingly wrote that 'the CELU people do not really understand politics', and were acting out of perceptions that it would be impolite not to accept invitations. Nevertheless, he arranged a meeting with the leadership to communicate the unacceptability of having done so.

On hearing about the arrival of a Soviet trade union delegation to Ethiopia on another occasion, ICFTU General Secretary Omar Becu (1966) wrote to its local representative demanding that 'you take immediate initiative [for a] common approach among free trade union representatives to make clear to CELU [the] consequences of accepting aid from elsewhere', adding that he was 'expecting firmness in handling this situation'. The ICFTU representative in Addis Ababa reported back that he had assembled the representatives of FES, Danish *Landsorganisationen*, and called on the advice of AALC. Presenting a joint front of financiers they called CELU's president and secretary general to a meeting, of which he gave the following account (Kindström 1967a):

> *In the discussions my colleagues and myself were blaming both [Beyene] Solomon and [Fissehatsion] Tekie very hard [for] their action. Brother Tekie said that if he had known our serious reaction he should not [have] arranged this visit without consulting us first. That gave us the opportunity to tell him that he always is unwilling to inform and consult us of his dealing with CELU affairs. For instance; of his going to Dakar we [were] informed just a few days before his departure but*

> *no one told about his intended trip to Europe after the Dakar Conference. That Brother Tekie had been to Budapest I got knowledge of by the cable from you. I told Brother Tekie that I knew of his visit to Budapest and asked him where else he had been and he told that he had been even to Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.*
>
> *I have had several private talks in this matter with Brother Solomon, and he has told me for sure that CELU is not going to accept any aid from the Russians.*

Having proceeded to discuss the matter with representatives of the MNCD and received the latter's assurances that the government would not allow any aid from the Soviet Union to CELU in whichever case, the ICFTU representative laid the matter to rest for the time being. The records thus indicates how the ICFTU and its allies demanded that CELU report on all its operations, and reserved the right to decide on matters of whom and where CELU officers could meet or go. But despite CELU repeatedly bowing to pressure and acceding to ICFTU demands, the records also show that such high-handed interference bred resentment and provoked attempts to circumvent it through rather innocuous and sporadic contacts with WFTU parties, while often, as testified to in the above, trying to conceal these from the ICFTU[93]. Another 'serious complication' thus developed when the ICFTU assistant general secretary attended the 1970 CELU anniversary celebrations and noticed the presence of two representatives of the Soviet trade union centre. This is how he reported it (Paladino 1970):

> *I officially protested the presence of the WFTU and reminded CELU officers… that since I was obliged to report to the general secretary and the Executive Board on my representation to the Conference, that I would require explanations on CELU's invitation to the WFTU. The explanations which were given were of a make-shift nature and contradictory. The CELU officers finally resorted to the implication that the WFTU had been invited as a result of Government pressure. When I offered to discuss this directly with the Government and the Emperor if necessary, this argument was withdrawn.*
>
> *Most of us who witnessed the activities of CELU officers and their treatment of the Russian and WFTU representatives during these days concluded that the decision to invite the WFTU was one calculated to balance the impression that CELU was heavily dependent on the family of free trade unions; that the invitation was manoeuvred by the secretariat officers of CELU, aided and abetted by the inability of the CELU president, Beyene Solomon, to cope with the situation.*
>
> *I advised CELU officers that the ICFTU would look sternly on any continuous relationship of the CELU with the WFTU, and that the CELU would have to be*

[93] 'CELU officers always try to keep secret for me their connections with the trade unions in communist countries as I am an adversary of it', Kindström (1968) wrote home to the ICFTU.

> *judged in the future by its acts as by its stated intentions. In my discussions with our representatives Kindström and Kanyago, I left instructions that from now on they would have to deal with CELU with a stronger hand. They agreed that the policy of caution which has been employed during the formative years of CELU would now have to be abandoned for more positive guidance*

In other words, responding to a token gesture of simulating autonomy on the part of CELU, the ICFTU determined that the exercise of even stricter control was warranted. In light of CELU's heavy reliance on ICFTU funds, this determination came with traction. Assistance from ICFTU and the international 'free' trade union movement thus came with another major constriction of autonomy. To make matters worse the ICFTU struck up a close working relationship with the imperial state, and was granted access to its highest offices including that of the emperor (Claverie 1960). Any radical impulse would now be caught between and checked by, on the one hand and internally, a moderate leadership, and on the other hand and externally, an international trade union movement and the imperial state, working under close mutual understanding.

4.3 Achievements and obstacles

The training of union leaders was a task that the CELU leadership and its international allies took very seriously. Rather than merely a capacity-building exercise, such training included a crucial controlling/domesticating aspect in that it inculcated perceptions of the type of unionism deemed legitimate by CELU's leadership and its allies: business unionism. An example of this reasoning is found in the archives of the ICFTU. Reporting on 'a serious wild cat strike in the course of which violence occurred', a West German labour advisor at the MNCD wrote that 'fortunately, it could be proved that in the pertinent undertaking no union activities whatsoever had been started before'. From this, he wrote, the conviction that 'education is primordial' had been reinforced (Graf von Baudissin 1963a).

The concern with preventing strike activity continued to motivate the provision of training. In the aftermath of the 1963 general strike threat the same MNCD labour advisor wrote disquietedly that 'although the danger' of a national strike had been overcome – and an, in his mind, entirely positive purge of the leadership had been achieved – there was now an urgent need to promote 'better co-ordination, cooperation with educational and other agencies and practical advice'. To this end the advisor urged the ICFTU to step in and provide assistance 'immediately', for, he stated 'we cannot afford to leave the Ethiopian labour leaders alone for any longer period which would lead only to

a repetition of past frustration and even radicalisation' (Graf von Baudissin 1963b). In 1966, moreover, ICFTU representative Kindström (1966a) reported having been able to make use of a volatile situation – widespread unrest had led the EEF to call for government intervention – to convince the CELU leadership of the importance of conducting more intensive training of local union leaders. Neglect of education, he wrote, was 'in all simplicity the big reason to most of the trouble and grievances we are now afflicted with'. Labour unrest, in other words, was considered merely an expression of ignorance of essential trade union values and principles, for which a healthy dose of training and education, inculcating these values and principles, would constitute the most effective antidote.

It has been claimed that prior to the 1974 'the whole energy of the confederation was absorbed in arranging training seminars for trade union leaders' (Teketel 1983: 13). By 1972 no less than 85 training seminars had been held with 2 923 workers' representatives across the country, and 148 educational film screenings had been held for 62 184 workers (CELU 1972). Retaining this focus on training, CELU conducted a range of other activities. The confederation rendered legal and practical services to unions, assisted in collective bargaining efforts, negotiated disputes between local unions and employers[94], supported unions engaged in legal wranglings, and published the newspaper *Voice of Labour*. Basic unions supported by CELU, furthermore, engaged in activities that reflected the origin of the Ethiopian labour movement in workers' self-help associations. Such activities included revenue-raising activities, the organisation of consumer and credit cooperatives, charitable and welfare efforts that included a major literacy campaign, provision of unemployment benefits, the organisation of sports and entertainment, and vocational training (Graf von Baudissin 1964: 564-565; Voice of Labour 1973b: 30).

Despite the curtailment of its autonomy and the increasing separation of the leadership from the rank-and-file, the Ethiopian labour movement continued to make progress over the 1960s and early 1970s. Between 1963 and 1965 CELU affiliated unions had grown from 29 to 42; to reach 104 in 1966; 201 in March 1974; and 225 a year later. Membership, meanwhile had tripled from 10 000

[94] Negotiation and mediation constituted another defining function of CELU. 'CELU, by virtue of its wide coverage is looked upon to by many unions as conciliator and advocate', CELU (1965) reported to ICFTU. It stated that 'about 40 percent of [active unions] have involved CELU in their negotiations with management'. 'Almost all seek the help of CELU when the case goes to the Labour Department for conciliation and mediation', it reported, with 90 percent of 1644 cases lodged with the latter allegedly involving CELU.

to 30 000 between 1963 and 1964[95]; reaching 38 000 in 1966; 55 000 in 1968; 73 000 in 1973; 90 000 in March 1974; and around 200 000 in 1975 (Zack 1967; Stutz 1967: 117; Fissehatsion 1968; Seleshi 1976: 28; Teketel 1983: 12; Killion 1985: 470). The pace of growth, an imperial government advisor admitted, 'exceeded every expectation' (Graf von Baudissin 1964: 564).

Achievements recorded over the first long decade included the completion of a number of collective agreements, which by the end of the decade covered around 30 percent of CELU members (Emmanuel 1977: 70). In the first few years, these included 'the unions at HVA, EAL, the railroad, and several commercial firms and textile mills', and by 1972, 44 unions representing 25 000 workers were covered by collective agreements (Killion 1985: 486, 489-490; CELU 1972). Early collective agreements included provisions that were often quite beneficial to workers, including, in one example, 'a 15 percent wage increase, free housing and medical care'; and in others quite frequently increments of around 10 percent (ICFTU 1964; CELU 1972). These agreements were direct outcomes of effective pressure underpinned by a willingness to engage in conflict when required. The ability to effect and sustain such pressure was related to size, and 'the strategic economic position' of the various enterprises (Killion 1985: 486). As a result, it was unions such as HVA, Bahir Dar textiles, Ethiopian Airlines (EAL), Indo—Ethiopian textiles, General Ethiopian Transport, Mitchell Cotts, and CFE that managed to conclude initial collective agreements[96]. Another factor that united early entrants to collective agreements was that most such enterprises were state- or foreign-owned or managed. Suter (1966: 36) found early collective agreements to 'have resulted in definite improvements in the workers' lot, especially as regards wages, fringe benefits, and protection against arbitrary dismissal'. He moreover found this to be linked to the existence of a vibrant labour movement as many of the enterprises where workers saw such betterment had strong unions, and had experienced strikes and unrest. Killion (1985: 486) too found the establishment of collective agreements to be linked to the prevalence of unrest,

[95] The precision of some of these figures are contestable, but the nature of the trajectory is not. Emmanuel (1977: 65), for example, states that the total membership in April 1963 was 15 000 rather than 10 000. CELU itself, on its affiliation application to the ICFTU, cited its original membership as 20 000 (Beyene 1963a), and it continuously reported seemingly inflated numbers of new recruits each year by consistently, in each year's application for funds, revising the preceding year's membership numbers downward. The numbers submitted to the ISF were in turn systematically inflated by ICFTU's own officers. See, for example, Robinson (1963), where CELU's reported 20 000 members are cited as 25 000.

[96] Shortage of activists and staff with qualifications to negotiate collective agreement meant that all early agreements had to be negotiated by CELU headquarter staff (Mesfin 1983, interview with Tom Killion). This was a factor that reinforced the trend towards the conclusion of agreements in the largest workplaces first.

and in the particular case of HVA's Wonji-Shoa site, Bahru (2008: 120-145) described how sustained and repetitive processes of strikes, petitioning, organising and collective bargaining forced the management to recognise the union, to bargain with it, and eventually to significantly improve labour conditions.

Outside of the early achievers, however, Killion has argued that most collective agreements 'did little more than ratify minimum state labour standards' (Killion 1985: 489-490). Morehous (1968: 70) has corroborated this view, stating that 'many of the collective agreements [offered] little more than the law requires or what the employees had previously been receiving', and Syoum (2005: 99) found that 'the few [employers] that [were] willing to bargain [were] not willing to agree to more than what the law [stipulated]'. Because of this, he argued, the labour movement had turned towards the state, pressing for legislative and institutional changes. This sentiment was reflected in a speech delivered by CELU President Beyene Solomon (1972), where he stated that 'the unions have come to the conclusion that the fate of the Ethiopian worker does not so much depend on the day-to-day activities of individual employers, but more on [the] government', and, as a result, that CELU was aiming for greater influence at that level.

Morehous (1969) has discussed the dynamics by which differing outcomes were generated in different contexts. The prevalence of an active union or union experience in a company, he found, were factors that tended to generate more advantageous outcomes in terms of shorter working weeks, more generous sick-leave stipulations and closer adherence to agreements and legal provisions. More importantly, he argued, it was not so much the presence of any type of a labour union, but that of a *struggling* one, that was key in explaining advantageous outcomes, for in many cases where unions had fallen into inactivity, little or no improvements had been registered. Morehous (1969: 63), however, also found that while in many places the prevalence of a labour union caused 'many more labour problems' as it enhanced self-confidence and amplified workers' demands, the presence of a union was viewed positively by the management of several companies. The explanation offered was that it improved the ability of management to discipline workers, since, apparently, management perceived union leaders to be 'much more likely to support management' than workers were. These findings perfectly capture the dual nature of trade unionism described in the second chapter.

The Ethiopian labour movement encountered a number of profound challenges and obstacles in the long decade that followed the foundation of CELU. One such obstacle was the repression of organised labour at the level of the workplace. The dismissal of union representatives leading up to the aborted general strike attempt in 1963 has already been noted. Six years later, Morehous (1969: 51, 69) would claim that 'the area of dismissal remains the most litigated [and] the most important in the eyes of employees', with the 'fear of dismissal' – 'all pervasive' as it was taken to be – constituting the 'dominant characteristic of employment relations in Ethiopia'. There were few restrictions to the right of employers to arbitrarily dismiss workers, and where severance pay was legally required, this requirement was often simply ignored. The dismissal of workers in the process of forming a union was often used to pre-empt union formation, and where unions had already been formed targeted dismissals of union officials or unionised workers remained frequent. Morehous (1969: 66) listed a set of examples that indicated 'the extent to which some companies have gone to thwart a union'. They included 'one bottling company [whose management] refused to recognise the right of its workers to form a union until a short strike was staged coinciding with a visit to the company by officials of the MNCD'; 'the managing director of another company freely [admitting] that if the union pushed too much [for] a collective agreement, he would simply dismiss its leaders'; and one garage were 'workers were told that since they were now working for different employers, they could not mix, the one objecting employee being summarily dismissed'. Other examples included the banning of all discussion among employees at work, and several employers who 'openly admitting that an employee who complains too much will be dismissed' (Morehous 1969: 70). In Dire Dawa, the basic union of the Chandris meat canning factory reported having had no less than 132 members arbitrarily dismissed by 1973[97]. Morehous (1969) found that the strategical choice of whether to cooperate with and attempt to co-opt union leadership in order to exercise greater control over workers, or to suppress unionisation altogether, tended to vary depending on the country of origin of owners and managers. Syoum (2005: 68) concurred, claiming that foreign-owned and managed enterprises tended to be more accommodating. This, however, did not constitute a universal feature. The Lazaridis textile factory, A. Besse & Co, and Banco di Roma, were some of the foreign owned companies that were engaged in disputes for

[97] This number is found on CELU's 'Confidential Data: Summary of Unions' sheet for Chandris, located in CETU's archive. Although 132 dismissed worker is an exceptionally high number, many unions reported, in the same summary sheets compiled in 1973, being at loggerheads with the employer over dismissed workers.

having fired their union leaders in the year 1971 alone. At the Diabaco Cotton Company under Greek ownership, moreover, unrelenting repression of the labour movement was practiced. All members of the executive committee of the company union had been fired in the 1960s, and in 1972 union representatives reported that 'every time there is a general meeting the management calls for the police and workers are jailed for no reason' (CELU 1972). This draws attention to collusion between employers and the state.

State bias presented a significant obstacle to the movement. On this point there is a broad general agreement across the literature. According to Emmanuel (1977: 71), for example, state intervention in industrial conflict was frequent, and tended, 'in most cases' to be 'in support of the employers'. Seleshi (1979: 688) has concurred, labelling the government altogether 'anti-labour'. The manner in which the boundaries of permissible union activity were policed has been touched upon. In regular times labour leaders were habitually harassed when conducing organising campaigns, officials were vetted and sometimes purged or arrested, the confederation was subject to surveillance and adherence to strict guidelines and warning, and its newspaper was tightly censored. But where parts of the labour movement still transgressed the boundaries of what was acceptable, a stronger reaction could be expected. Where strikes did occur, they were 'in most cases… resolved by the use of state police forces' (Seleshi 1979: 689)[98]. Police was, for example, called on during the 1973 strikes of Diabaco cotton factory and Central Printing Press workers (Seleshi 1979: 698), and in the course of the 1971 Assab port strike an army officer in charge of port security threatened 'to shoot any worker who did not report to work' (Beyene 2010: 107). In another example an attempt to organise plantation workers in Nurahera and Melka Sedi was banned by the authorities and the union treasury seized. As the workers staged a strike in protest, police shot 'several' workers (Killion 1985: 537). A subsequent attempt to march to Addis to petition the emperor was also prevented by the police. But in the field of organising agricultural workers such as those mentioned, the cautious attitude of CELU's leadership constituted an additional obstacle. Killion (1985: 536) claims that its president Beyene Solomon was reluctant to organise agrarian labour, and quotes a contemporaneous report from the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers (IFPAAW) stating that Beyene was 'frightened' of

[98] Not all policing was reactive. Frequently, police presence was called upon to pre-empt industrial action. In September 1970, for example, workers of the Indo-Ethiopian textile factory had resolved to go on strike, but before they could walk off police forces showed up preventing them from doing so (Tsegai et al. 1970).

the latter's organisational efforts among agrarian labour ‘as he and CELU exist at the sufferance of the emperor’.

Even where repression was not open and dramatic, everyday state presence and bias was felt. An early ICFTU visitor to Addis Ababa reported that ‘three men were always behind me to watch my movements, record of the persons who come to meet me and report my speeches’ (Ramanjuam 1963). Another ICFTU representative was told by a prominent Ethiopian academic about the latter's suspicion of foul play involved in the death of two leaders of the CFE union from the very same cause – a burst spleen – only days apart (Mboya 1958). Equally suspicious was a 1965 attempt on the life of CELU President Beyene, the reasons for and perpetrator of which was never established[99]. In more mundane terms, basic union leaders frequently complained that the government was ‘anti-labour’ and that the Labour Relations Board was ‘anti-employee and anti-union’ (Morehous 1969: 60). This was most emphatically expressed in its failure to safeguard the rights of union leaders. ‘The Board's reported tendency to allow dismissal’, Morehous (1969: 81) reported, ‘has placed a deep sense of insecurity on all present and potential union leaders’[100].

A telling example of how state repression functioned in synergy with moderating pressures emanating from employers and the CELU leadership can be found in the case of the Dire Dawa Textile Factory, where the assertive labour leader Zeleke Woldemariam had been imprisoned for allegedly organising an attack on a management representative. His successor Shiferaw Dessalegn, however, did not prove to be sufficiently malleable either, and was accused by the CELU leadership of making unreasonable demands on the employer. CELU first attempted to remove Shiferaw by bureaucratic means, but when this move was opposed by workers and thus failed, the

[99] Beyene (2010) discusses the event in his biography, without clarifying his thoughts on this. Half a century earlier, ICFTU Representative Kindström (1965) had found him ‘very uncommunicative of his own opinion about the reason for the seek of his life’. On the question of whether it was related to his position, Kindström reported Beyene as having answered in the affirmative, but this, Kindström reported ‘is all I get out of him’.

[100] As an FEE (n.d.) compendium of cases reviewed by the LRB up to 1967 indicates, however, the LRB was not averse to rule in favour of reinstating or compensating workers in individual cases. This, however, was never the case when a strike was involved. And the huge backlog of the LRB in any case meant that the effect of the selective justice it dispensed was undermined. Moreover, in several cases where the LRB ruled in favour of reinstating fired workers, the ruling was simply ignored by employers – see for example Addis Zemen (1971b).

CELU leaders called on the state to intervene and remove him[101], which the state subsequently did (Killion 1984: 507-508).

Progress and obstacles aside, a rising insurgent tide displeased with the orientation of the leadership emerged within the movement in its early years. 'Internal and external opposition to CELU's leadership is as old as the organisation itself and seems to gather momentum in course of time' a CELU employee (Emmanuel 1977: 71) wrote. The first challenge against Beyene's leadership came only a year after the confederation was founded. This is documented in a letter sent from CELU staffers Gebreselassie Gebremariam and Mesfin Gebremichael (1964) to a North American academic, which described an attempt by CELU General Assembly members, conducted while Beyene was out of the country, to establish an investigation committee, force a GA meeting, and possibly oust the president altogether[102]. Although this attempt failed, more challenges were to come.

Dissatisfaction was, according to Emmanuel (1977: 72) evident on two levels: with the confederation leadership and its administration of the confederation; and with the strategic orientation they pursued. With regards to the former, Beyene was accused of being an employee of the confederation rather than a representative of any constituent union, and his leadership was accused of subverting internal democracy. In terms of the latter, the leadership's cautious deferentialism towards, and close collaboration with, the government was also a cause of discord, and the leadership's socio-material separation from the rank-and-file fed into and fuelled critiques of its role and orientation. On two separate occasions – in July 1964 and in December 1970 – the leadership had failed to honour General Assembly decisions to call general strikes and national demonstrations (Seleshi 1976: 7). Such subversion could only further frustrate and antagonise

[101] Fissehatsion Tekie (1983, interview) is on record stating that since Shiferaw was making demands on the employer that were considered excessive, and since he refused to listen to CELU's leaderships demands that he 'restrain himself… *we* [the CELU leadership] *had to tell the union to dismiss him*'. 'Not only did we tell the union but we took a stand', Fissehatsion stated, and that stand included the direct intervention in the affairs of the union. 'We had a very rough time even subsequently', he concluded, 'although we succeeded eventually *with the support of the government*'. This, however, was not without resistance from the workers. Beyene (1970) reported that as Shiferaw was removed, 16 of his supporters entrenched themselves in the union offices, and began 'arousing trouble', in which one police man was hit by a stone and injured. As a result, Shiferaw and the 16 workers were arrested.

[102] Gebreselassie and Mesfin described the attempt as motivated by the desire of an oppositional candidate to take over the presidency and acquire a hefty pay, as well as by 'personal hatred against Beyene by some union leaders'. They did, however, admit that there were substantial issues involved. Such issues included the frequency of GA meetings, which had not been held for some time, allegedly because of the leadership's fear of criticism, and that 'there are some union leaders who genuinely think that Beyene is having too much contact with the government'.

dissatisfied members and representatives. In light of this, the leadership could not exercise complete control over a movement that had begun to exhibit tendencies of radicalisation. Neither could it check this slide. Factional struggles and wildcat action became the vents for militant pressure in the decade to come, but eventually the built-up pressure would prove uncontrollable.

4.4 Radicalisation and conflict

By the mid-1960s, CELU's leadership had begun to voice concern about being 'unable to cope with the demands of the workers', which, it claimed 'were often quite unrealistic' (CELU 1965). It reported to its international allies that there had been 'much disagreements between CELU and its affiliates'[103], with 'one of the major criticism against CELU [being] that it was not doing enough for its membership'. Around the same time, the ICFTUs representative in Addis Ababa reported home that the CELU board was 'divided in different groups' (Kindström 1966b). But divisions were not confined to any one level of the confederation. Frictions and contention prevailed throughout the structures of CELU.

Most fundamentally, opposition emerged from the leadership's refusal to put the movement on an offensive footing. When strike activity and unrest nevertheless broke out – which it frequently did, as shall be made evident in the sixth chapter – the default priority of the leadership was to come to a speedy agreement with employers. The Federation of Employers of Ethiopia (FEE) testified to having enjoyed good relations with CELU's leadership and was indeed particularly satisfied with mutual efforts 'to avert industrial unrest' (FEE 1972: 1). 'I always chose the path of peace in my dealings with employers', Beyene (2010: 109), the CELU president of the time, was also to recollect. Somewhat contradictory, Beyene (2016, personal interview) has also stated that there were instances where CELU's leadership covertly and discretely supported local strikes, officially calling on unions to adhere to legal procedures while simultaneously 'indirectly telling them to go [on strike]'. Although this appears a prudent tactic in the face of the repressive inclinations of the imperial state, it is evident from internal documentation and external communication that such covert instigation must have occurred only rarely. In general, the leadership worked to contain and displace militant pressure that was building from below, and while it did so relatively effectively over its initial years, the displaced pressures built up and exacerbated the rift within the movement.

[103] In fact, the same report made reference to a 'perpetual strife between CELU and its affiliates', which the leadership had hoped that the constitutional changes of 1965 would put an end to.

Early militant labour opposition, however, occurred without structured coordination, and the CELU leadership was to skilfully combine a strategy of playing on external ties and resources it had access to with a degree of procedural and constitutional manipulation, in order to retain overall control over the movement. One example of the former was the selective disbursement and withholding of services, assistance and funds accessible at the central level – a method frequently utilised to compel constituent unions to fall in line with the leadership (Kiflu 2014, personal interview). The latter included revising the CELU constitution to allow for the promotion of key moderates to high posts; interfering in constituent union elections against disfavoured candidates; as well as deploying a number of gimmicks to sway the vote, or stall to prevent it; and subverting taken decisions where a vote could not be prevented or its outcome not predetermined[104]. Despite cries of foul play triggered by such manipulation, the leadership was re-elected at the General Assembly meetings of 1965, 1967, 1969 and 1972. But it was not without contention.

In the lead-up to the 1965 elections, Beyene's leadership was challenged by Deputy Secretary Alemu Bogale, but the latter failed to generate sufficient support and was removed just before the elections were held. The re-election of the leadership was then followed by constitutional amendments that shored up its position. As a result of these changes, two employees of the confederation, who were part of Beyene's moderate group, were made secretary general and deputy secretary general respectively: Fissehatsion Tekie and Tesfa Gebremariam[105]. Following Beyene's own elevation to the presidency, this was another step towards instituting a non-representative layer of top officials. The move in this direction, however, generated its own tensions – 'the opposition charged, and not without cause, that under the original CELU constitution anyone not directly linked or delegated by either a local or national union, cannot hold electoral office in the confederation', a CELU insider wrote (Emmanuel 1977: 73). More constitutional engineering followed the 1967 General Assembly meeting. Unlike in the past, when the incumbent president was barred from chairing the board and the general secretary was ineligible from serving as board secretary, they were henceforth assigned to these positions mandatorily. Moreover, the task of

[104] Former CELU staffer Emmanuel Fayessa (1983, interview with Tom Killion) claims that refusal to intercede with the government when undesirable officials were elected, thereby denying them registration and legal recognition, was another method by which the CELU leadership discriminated against undesirable candidates. Additionally, preferred candidates were sometimes supported by CELU's open campaigning in constituent union elections, which included the evocation of the risk of government intervention. Ironically, such intervention was occasionally courted by the CELU leadership itself, when its interventions failed to sway the outcome.

[105] Tesfa Gebremariam was eventually to depart from this group, but only much later.

electing officeholders was transferred from the GA to the board, with the GA only providing ratification (Kindström 1967c). These measures significantly increased the powers of the top office-holders at the expense of the GA.

In April 1969, Beyene's third re-election was followed by the co-option of two more staffers to the CELU leadership. This meant that five members of CELU's central leadership represented no constituent unions, out of which four had no experience of shop floor work whatsoever[106]. In the GA, however, the leadership was criticised for failing to 'properly communicate' the demands of the workers to the state (Killion 1985: 477). It was resolved that a strike should be called on Ethiopian Christmas Day in January 1970 to advance CELU's demand for a new labour law. But after having shored up its position, the leadership cancelled the GA-sanctioned strike and settled for the establishment of a joint committee with the government to look into the matter (Beyene 2010: 116-117). No revisions to the labour law were adopted.

CELU's international allies came in handy to the leadership, as the latter exhibited great skilfulness in utilising external ties to defeat challenges to its incumbency and moderate line. When discussing the 1967 congress, ICFTU representative Kindström (1967d) presents an illustrating account of the manner in which this could take place:

> *Abraham Gabre [chairman of the executive board of the CELU] has always been very fond of WFTU and AATUF[107] and adversary to the ICFTU, [FES], and AALC and the West in general and have argued for assistance and aid from the East instead of the West. He had support of some few members within [the] CELU board for the idea of aid from the East, and possibly of some other union leaders. However, some time before the annual Conference, Brother Beyene Solomon got knowledge of the intention of Abraham Gabre to raise the question about the foreign assistance to the CELU at the Conference without informing CELU in advance. Brother Solomon informed me what was going on and both of us agreed to the necessity of a counter-move to prevent the attempt of Abraham Gabre… I suggested Brother Solomon to have a flag made with CELU emblem and to present the flag to the CELU as a gift from the ICFTU, at the Conference. Brother Solomon found the idea good and, as the excellent policy maker he is, suggested that the flag should not be given at the opening ceremony but the time Gabre raised his matter. The flag was made, and in the afternoon on the second day of the Conference Brother Solomon called me to present the flag. Gabre had at that time raised his*

[106] These were Beyene Solomon, president; Fissehatsion Tekie, secretary general; Tesfa Gebremariam, Mesfin Gebremichael and Gebreselassie Gebremariam. The latter four were ironically – and rather bizarrely, considering that US sympathies laid with their policies – termed 'CELU's four horsemen' by the US chargé d'affaires Parker Wyman (1975b).
[107] The All-African Trade Union Federation. A body that in 1973 was replaced by OATUU.

> *question but Brother Solomon suggested a break of the discussion for the 'flag ceremony'. I could never imagine that the flag should be of so great effect as it became. All the delegates were happy and applauded and cheered and many of them made speeches with thanks to the ICFTU and praising the ICFTU for all the support and assistance given to the CELU. As the whole afternoon became a 'thanksgiving day' to the ICFTU, Brother Solomon found afterwards there were neither time nor reason to continue the discussion of the matter raised by Gabre, and suggested the matter dismissed which was met with universal approval. Afterwards almost every delegate personally thanked me and the ICFTU for the grandiose gift. That proves again that things which can be seen with one's own eyes and touched with the hand is more appreciated by these people than things of abstract nature even if the latter is worth a million more.*

Aside from contemptuously denying 'these people' the capability of abstract thought, this account starkly demonstrates how the ICFTU colluded with the top leadership in subverting CELU's internal democracy – the ostensible protection of which constituted its official purpose for operating in the country. But no such collusion could completely stem the rising tide of opposition against the leadership.

'By the early 1970s', Killion (1985: 478) has written, 'the dissatisfaction among various groups within CELU had coalesced into a serious opposition movement to the entrenched national leadership'. When, at this stage, the opposition lodged a complaint with the labour department of the MNCD pertaining to the unconstitutionality of having non-representatives as office holders, it was dismissed, quite likely because the Ministry's sympathies laid with the leadership (Emmanuel 1977: 74). In 1972, vocal opposition resurfaced as the CELU leadership suspended the CELU representative in Eritrea, Mesfin Abraha – a supporter of the opposition. Moreover, in order to eliminate the base of the most strident opposition, the regional committee for Addis Ababa and its vicinity was dissolved by fiat. The outrage this created forced the reinstatement[108] of Mesfin and eventually the reestablishment of the regional committee for Addis Ababa and its vicinity. But the CELU leadership meanwhile won a fourth re-election. The opposition was convinced that the vote counting process was flawed and subject to government interference (Emmanuel 1977: 74-75). As the demand for a recount was turned down, and a CELU employee that had supported the opposition in the election was dismissed, the opposition hardened (Disaffiliated unions 1973;

[108] This was disputed by Fissehatsion (1983, interview with Tom Killion), who claimed that Mesfin was not reinstated, but replaced by a candidate favoured by Beyene. Either way, it is documented that Mesfin Abraha remained a labour official in 1974 and eventually was elected into CELU's leading body in 1975. Mesfin, according to Beyene (2015, personal interview), survived the revolution.

Killion 1985: 480). The charges brought against the leadership included 'gross negligence in running the affairs of the confederation' including financial misadministration, feeble organisational attempts, electoral irregularities, and mismanagement of internal disputes (Emmanuel 1977: 75). CELU's leadership, the oppositional movement claimed, 'neither represent the workers nor sees itself as representing workers; rather having never dealt with a boss, they actually regard themselves as akin to management rather than labour' (Disaffiliated unions 1973). The leadership was accused of colluding with employers and, it was alleged, had gone as far as sabotaging collective bargaining and blocking collective agreements drawn up by oppositional unions (Disaffiliated unions 1973). In terms of objectives, the oppositional movement advocated a socially broader, more offensive, and confrontational stance. It resolved that the most viable option was to disaffiliate and to create a new central institution of Ethiopian labour.

In response to the fallout from the 1972 election, 30 dissatisfied unions[109], representing some 15 000 members, disaffiliated from CELU, declared their intention to form a new trade union centre, and applied for recognition with the Labour Department of the MNCD (Emmanuel 1977: 72-84). Unsurprisingly, the MNCD refused to register the new centre, and the oppositional movement instead launched a campaign to effect a change of orientation within CELU proper, as well as to undermine the deferential CELU leadership. 'Because of their disciplined organisation and commitment as well as their vigorous organising drives', Emmanuel (1977:76) has written, they 'were soon to surface and shake CELU to its foundations'.

The dissenting unions included several which were dominated by white-collar workers found in, for example, insurance firms, trade companies, and Ethiopian Airlines[110], but they also included unions of less privileged workers, such as that of United Wood Workers. That opposition was coming from a militant position is obvious from the declarations of the disaffiliated unions, but it can be questioned to what extent such opposition had been politically radicalised by the time. The disaffiliated unions' underground leaflets advocated change and implicated CELU's leadership through its links with the imperial government (Emmanuel 1977: 83). But the fact that the disaffiliated unions were seeking international affiliation with the Christian Democratic-oriented

[109] 12 from Addis Ababa; 17 from Eritrea; and one from the Gojam province (Emmanuel 1977: 74).
[110] The union of Ethiopian Airlines had consistently been one of the most militant and its workers had staged strikes at least twice before the 1970s. In disillusionment with the cancellation of the 1963 strike threat and the subsequent moderate line espoused by CELU's leadership, it had withdrawn from playing an active role in CELU since (Fissehatsion 1983, interview with Tom Killion).

World Confederation of Labour (WCL) – hardly known for its radicalism – places subsequent developments into relevant context.

The close relations between the state and CELU's leadership were again displayed when a visiting WCL official was stopped at Addis Ababa airport and had his documents seized, after CELU's President Beyene had reported him to the security services. Beyene (2010: 167) argues that this was justified as the WCL official was 'carrying documents detrimental to the security of the country', but that argument seems to reflect a conflation between the security of incumbency and the security of the country. Whichever the case, the intervention illustrates the extent of collusion between the CELU leadership and the state in jointly checking the movement. But if the central leadership had hitherto been saved by its ties to the state and international patrons, dynamics outside its control were soon to condemn it to irrelevance: the fracturing of the Ethiopian labour movement was halted and reversed only by the outbreak of a major wave of labour militancy. When this was reinforced by massive stirrings among Ethiopia's urban population, beginning in February 1974, and a concomitant explosion in working class activity, the leadership would be rendered unable to arrest the pressures from below and forced to embark on a more confrontational course. But if February 1974 marked the beginning of a popular upsurge, the breakdown of imperial authority, and eventually a social revolution, it did not mark the starting point of the proletarian insurgency that has tended to be subsumed under it. Among workers, trouble had been brewing significantly more intensively in the period leading up to the February upsurge and strike activity had sharply increased over the preceding year.

In July 1973, the dissenting unions and CELU signed an agreement wherein the latter committed to call an extraordinary General Congress in March 1974, in order to thoroughly review and revise the confederation's constitution (CELU 1973a). Moreover, the agreement regularised a procedure in which vacant posts were filled, and it stipulated a procedure for the regional committees of Eritrea and Addis Ababa and its surroundings – the two strongest bases for opposition – to adopt by-laws within one month's time. These concessions – which essentially met the opposition's immediate demand for a congress under more transparent conditions and the curtailment of the national centre's scope to interfere in the affairs of constituent unions and regional committees – led to a temporary truce. But before the constitutional issues could be resolved in the congress, focus would shift to more urgent tasks.

In that same year, 1973, Diabaco Cotton factory workers and Central Printing Press workers had gone on strikes, but failed to receive support from CELU (Seleshi 1979: 698). When the large union of the state-owned Commercial Bank of Ethiopia (CBE) called a strike demanding that its right to engage in collective bargaining be respected, however, pressure piled on CELU's leadership to intervene in support of the 1200 striking bank workers. On August 26, 1973, a General Council session was called, and resolved to take solidarity measures, warned that it was ready to intervene, and vowed to stay in session until the issue had been resolved (CELU 1973b). The enthusiastic support that this confrontational move received within the movement is apparent in several dozens of letters from basic unions to Beyene Solomon expressing their determination and readiness to intervene[111]. Faced with such decisiveness, the imperial government conceded to the bank workers' demands, and a collective agreement was signed which included substantial retroactive wage increases (Andu-alem 1999: 48). This marked an important victory on behalf of the labour movement, and put into negative perspective the deferential strategies hitherto pursued, as it was made apparent that confrontation could result in major gains. As the February movement commenced, this lesson lingered heavy, and as pressure from within the labour movement to join in the popular upsurge increased, the reluctant top leadership was cornered[112].

The CELU congress of early 1974 was held in a radicalised mood. By now, the oppositional movement had developed a comprehensive critique that included fundamental aspects of CELU's strategy, accusing the leadership of ‘economism’, of betraying the labour movement, and of collaborating with a reactionary government: ‘the opposition's basic argument was that the Ethiopian labour movement [had] not only the right, but also the duty and responsibility, to go beyond its own immediate interests and join the masses, if not lead them, in a popular resistance against [the emperor’s] semi-feudal and oppressive regime’ (Emmanuel 1977: 77). The congress issued a long list of demands that were underlined by the threat of a general strike. CELU's demands have been characterised as ‘primarily corporate’ by unsympathetic observers (Ottaway

[111] See, for example, letters from the unions of Ethiopian Petroleum Workers (Hailu 1973); Indo-Ethiopian Textile Factory (Gezahegn and Abdu 1973); Michell Cotts (Sherefedin 1973); HVA (Elias 1973); Ethiopian Airlines (Seid 1973); Addis Ababa Bank (Alemayehu 1973); United Wood Workers (Gebremicahel 1973); and Addis Ababa Hilton (Woldemariam 1973).

[112] Fissehatsion Tekie (1983, interview with Tom Killion), representing the top leadership, has admitted being against the proposal for a general strike. At most, he was willing only to repeat the practice of threatening to call one. Another member of the leadership, Gebreselassie Gebremariam (1983, interview with Tom Killion), meanwhile, contends that the general sentiment among delegates of the GA was that a strike had to be called, and that the strike would be a political strike announcing the arrival of the labour movement as a country-wide political force.

1976: 477). This misinterpretation may emanate from the leadership's concomitant assurances of moderation and loyalty to the Emperor[113]. By this time, however, the leadership was no longer in effective command of the movement and the external mechanisms of repression and control that partly relied on that conduit had also broken down. A glance at the actual demands dispels their characterisation as purely corporate in nature. They include respect for the unconditional right of all workers to freely organise and to strike; the repealing of the old labour legislation and the implementation of a new progressive labour law; the establishment of a minimum wage and social security provisions including the establishment of pension funds; price controls; an end to censorship; and universal free education (CELU 1974a). That the demands were delivered as an ultimatum, and that government pleadings for negotiation were turned down, further underlines the unprecedented political and rebellious nature of this act of insubordination.

On March 7, when it had become clear that the demands could or would not be met, CELU called a general strike for the following day. Close to 100 000 workers honoured the call, paralysing the economy and communications for three days. The number of strikers underscored the resonance of the strike call as it surpassed the number of members in CELU-affiliated unions (Killion 1985: 550). The strike also demonstrated the clout of the labour movement as it forced the imperial state to surrender. The concessions extracted included government commitments to replace the labour law; to guarantee wage increments in all sectors and to establish a minimum wage; to allow all government workers to unionise; to punish managers who violated workers' rights; to introduce price controls; to postpone an unpopular reform of the educational sector and to make education free; and to establish pension and disability schemes; to restrict the legal space for irregular labour contracts; and finally to guarantee that no disciplinary actions were taken against any worker or union official participating in or leading the strike (*EH* 1974a). The fact that the state procrastinated and attempted to backpedal in the months that followed only underlines the magnitude of the initial concessions. Something similar can be said of official statements forthcoming in the wake of the strike. In the week that followed its conclusion state media lauded workers for ‘staying at home peacefully until their demands were met’, for their ‘gentlemanly behaviour’, and their ‘honest motives’ (*EH* 1974g). That was a far cry from the threatening and scolding rhetoric which had

[113] See for instance *Ethiopian Herald* (1974b).

accompanied the practice of control and repression in previous decades, and it indicated the degree to which the balance of forces had shifted.

The success of the general strike had three immediate effects on the disposition of the labour movement. The first was that it irrevocably discredited the central leadership and the deferential strategy it had pursued. Beyene only formally resigned a few months later[114], and while his lieutenants would remain in office until that autumn[115], they had lost effective control. The central leadership was henceforth unable to arrest the movement's drift towards increasing militancy, and despite attempts to stem the strike wave that followed, strikes multiplied[116]. The split with proponents of the moderate tradition was deepening across the movement. 'Within CELU affiliates', reported the US embassy (Wyman 1974a) 'inner rivalries are causing quarrels to flare up, and moderates are having to contend with more aggressive and radical elements. 'Fist fights', it stated, were 'not uncommon'.

A second effect of the strike was the soaring prestige of the labour movement and the sudden boom in membership it generated, which was reinforced by the government's reluctant permission for employees of over 40 public enterprises to unionise. In the weeks following the strike membership in CELU-affiliated unions increased by 40 percent, with some 35 000 workers joining its ranks (*EH* 1974j). Meanwhile, dormant unions were reenergised (Emmanuel 1977: 104). A US embassy cable from April of that year (Wyman 1974a) reported that 'CELU headquarters has become [a] rallying point for workers whether unionised or not', where 'daily hundreds, often thousands, assemble' keeping the assembly hall 'in constant use'. By July, another 10 000 new members had joined affiliated unions (*EH* 1974v).

A third and related effect of the strike was that it triggered an explosive boost in the confidence of workers vis-à-vis employers and the state. Five weeks after the settlement of the strike, the US embassy (Wyman 1974a) reported that the 'turmoil in labour scene continues', with new cases

[114] The content of Beyene's (1974) resignation letter suggests that his resignation indeed was due to his unpopularity in the movement. While not stating any direct reason, the short letter admitted that organisational performance had been far from satisfactory, and apologised 'for any hard feelings' caused.

[115] English names for various seasons are used here to convey an understanding of the Gregorian calendric months of the year in which events occurred, not as a description of the seasonal climate in Ethiopia. 'Summer', for this reason, broadly corresponds to the Ethiopian rainy season ክርምት; 'autumn' to the በልግ season; 'winter' to በጋ; and 'spring' to ፀደይ.

[116] See chapter 6.

arising ‘almost daily’. Throughout the spring and early summer a flurry of strikes engulfed the economy – from the smallest workplace to the largest, private to public, and across the country. Strikes large enough to warrant mention in the government mouthpiece *Ethiopian Herald* included those of airport employees; tobacco monopoly workers; teachers; haricot bean farm workers; import-export firm employees; civil aviation workers; employees of the Elementary School Building Unit; Addis Ababa municipality employees; finance ministry employees; railway workers; bus firm employees and transport company workers; dairy industry workers; hospital employees; garment manufacturing workers; taxi drivers; university staff; postal office workers; truck drivers; and telecommunication workers (*EH* 1974c; 1974d; 1974e; 1974f; 1974h; 1974i; 1974k; 1974l; 1974m; 1974n; 1974o; 1974p; 1974q; 1974u).

By late April 1974, however, a newly appointed government – whose tenure was to be short – attempted to stem militancy, reassert authority and impose industrial peace. Retroactively, the general strike was ruled illegal, and state media launched a campaign against workers for ‘spreading anarchy’, warning stern measures against strikers (*EH* 19743; 1974s; 1974t). The upsurge in labour activity only receded with the adoption of a strategy of repression, including the deployment of security forces in workplaces; the disruption of workers' meetings, beatings, and arrest of workers and union leaders; and the intervention by the Ministry of National Defence, threatening that should the CELU not stop its alleged agitation, it would be closed down (*EH* 1974t; 1974w). This shift in state rhetoric and practice towards labour indicates a fourth effect of the strike: it forced the state acknowledge the clout and potential of the labour movement and triggered the adoption of even tighter measures of supervision and repression. Although the repressive regime was relaxed in the summer of 1974, as a radical faction of the military came to seize control over the high offices of the state, the importance of pacifying the labour movement had been noted. Cumulatively, the noted effects meant that the labour movement and the state were firmly set on a course of continued and intensified confrontation over increasingly high stakes.

4.5 Revolution and aftermath

Upon toppling the imperial government and seizing power in September 1974, the PMAC suspended basic democratic rights, indicating that no opposition would be tolerated. CELU's annual General Assembly meeting was held in the immediate aftermath, with 250 representatives from across the country in attendance. The assembly was split between adherents to differing

orientations, but the momentum was with the radicals. A ‘fair amount of slogan shouting and occasional catcalls against CELU leadership’ allegedly accompanied the proceedings (Wyman 1974c). US embassy official Wyman (1974b) reported that ‘a degree of radicalism has appeared’ in which some leaders ‘are suggesting that foreign “exploiters” should be pushed out and that CELU must beware of too much Americanism’. The General Assembly adopted a resolution which lent support to the toppling of the imperial government but opposed the PMAC's usurpation of power from a popular movement of which it considered labour a central component. The suspension of democratic rights was also denounced, with a special emphasis on the ban on strikes and demonstrations. In place of the PMAC, the General Assembly rallied behind the radical left's demand for a provisional people's government to be established, in which CELU demanded representation. The resolution threatened that ‘urgent action’ would be taken in response to any harassment, which under the circumstances could only mean another general strike (CELU 1974b). The PMAC rejected CELU's demands with dismissive references to the latter's past orientation[117], but this ignored the obvious process of change CELU was in the midst of. However, while proponents of a radical readjustment of orientation were ascendant, several constituent unions, such as that of CFE and HVA's Metahara Sugar Plantation, rallied behind the new government (*EH* 1974x; 1974z). ‘Not all trade unionists were opposed to the new regime’, Clapham has noted (1990: 55): ‘the main industrial area of Addis Ababa, around Kaliti and Akaki to the south of the city, provided some of its most active and violent supporters’. This must be qualified, since the oppositional strand of the labour movement evidently also held some sway in those industrial areas. But from the outset, the labour movement was indeed split on how to view the PMAC, particularly in light of the latter's radical rhetoric and measures. The split would be seized upon in the tug-of-war between the PMAC and the labour movement that ensued.

In response to CELU's resolution its leaders were promptly arrested. The General Council ‘adamantly rejected’ a PMAC request to retract the GA resolution and the latent strike threat was consequently activated (Kailembo 1974a). Lack of clarity and coherence, however, doomed the strike attempt, and it was largely pre-empted. According to ICFTU representative Kailembo (1974a), the effort suffered from a lack of preparation and the fact that the union leaders that were to lead the strikes locally were all assembled in Addis Ababa. In Eritrea, communication failure

[117] ‘Where in the world has a trade union movement joined hands with the aristocracy and nobility to exploit workers’, an *Ethiopian Herald* editorial (1974y) rhetorically asks in response to CELU's declaration.

meant that the regional branch failed to call out its member unions (Sherry 1974). Kailembo, moreover, reported a rift within CELU's leadership, and suggested that Vice President Alem Abdi – a trade union leader from Seferian trading company and a veteran CELU General Council member – and staffer Tesfa Gebremariam were acting on behalf of the PMAC. To heighten such fears, Alem, who was the highest ranking CELU official that had not been arrested, actively worked to sabotage the strike by issuing a circular rescinding the General Assembly's strike call[118]. Accompanied by military officers, moreover, Alem toured workplaces telling workers that the strike had been called off, thereby severely undermining the strike call (Kiflu 2014, personal interview). In several places, the call was nevertheless heeded. Beyene (2010: 148-153) claims that the workers of Meta Abo Brewery were among those who actually walked off the job. A US embassy cable (Wyman 1974e) of September 25, moreover, stated that 'a few hotels and branches of Commercial Bank had none or small number of employees report for duty' while 'some 200-300 [striking] workers appeared mid-morning at CELU headquarters'. Soldiers soon appeared, however, and 'remaining CELU officials [were] obviously despondent and recognised the futility of further effort'. 'In retrospect', the cable noted, 'it is clear that [PMAC] saw clearly [that the] general strike threat had no backbone and, therefore, felt no compulsion to negotiate compromise'.

In the aftermath of the attempted strike, the re-subordination of the labour movement took on additional importance for the authorities. According to Alemu Abebe[119] (2014, personal interview), '[the PMAC] definitely saw the trade union [movement] as one of the potential places where opposition [could] flourish, so what it did after [the thwarted strike] was to make sure that this was not so'. Initially, a mixture of cooptive and repressive measures was adopted. The former included cajoling a new leadership to adopt a deferential orientation whereas the latter included police opening fire on a congregation of several thousands of workers in CELU's compound in October 1974, killing one and wounding two (*EH* 1974å). Following the shootings, workers were reported to have chanted in protest 'we got rid of the Emperor but see how we are being treated', while displaying the body of their dead comrade (Kailembo 1974b). That same month a

[118] Outside of this overt attempt to sabotage the strike, there were delegates who had favoured caution. The US embassy (Wyman 1974d) reported that it believed that the CELU leadership had only most reluctantly called the strike, and only because no compromise could be reached with PMAC. This ignores the fact that the strike notice was issued before serious negotiations could have taken place.

[119] Dr Alemu was initially a POMOA official, who in 1977 became the mayor of Addis Ababa. He was later to become a politburo member of the WPE and serve as, among other positions, deputy prime minister.

demonstration by ‘several hundred’ unemployed workers before an army camp was dispersed by ‘several truckloads of troops with guns at the ready’ and a commander making clear his readiness to order fire (Wyman 1974f).

Meanwhile, the loyalist group led by Alem Abdi attempted to exploit the vacuum that the arrests at the top had created to seize control over the organisation without holding new elections. In early January, while under control of this group, CELU issued a statement endorsing the PMAC and its ‘Ethiopian Socialism’ (*EH* 1975a). Right from the outset, however, Alem's leadership was embattled. A ‘committee of 15 dissidents in Addis [Ababa] CELU affiliates, headed by Getachew Amare from Besse Co’, was reported (Wyman 1974f) to have taken the lead in the campaign, demanding new elections to be held immediately. The leaders of the labour opposition could bank on an unabated groundswell of militant energies from the rank-and-file. This expressed itself not only in strike action, but also in turbulence at, among other places, the offices of the LRB. ‘Crowds of unemployed workers’, reported the US embassy (Wyman 1974f), ‘appear daily before [the] labour commissioner's office and block entrance’. Employers' representatives arriving at the offices were reported to ‘have been beaten up’ on several occasions, including a case of one being ‘heaved over [the] compound wall’. The workers were said to have attempted to set the buildings of the LRB on fire, and it was allegedly ‘not uncommon for [the] labour commissioner to be locked into his office, and frequently army and/or police called in to escort officials and members of LRB out of compound’.

In the spring of 1975 the struggle for control over CELU intensified. On May Day demonstrations of 1975 – the first such occasion to be observed in Ethiopia – demands raised by workers included respect for the independence of CELU, restoration of democratic rights, and the dismissal of Alem Abdi. The latter was unable to complete his speech because of the noise from outraged workers (Kiflu 2014, personal interview). One report described workers carrying placards ‘calling for the hanging of Alem Abdi and accusing him of being a tool of the government’ (ICFTU 1975). This public display of discontent demonstrated the likelihood that proponents of a radical reorientation of CELU would come out on top if a GA was held under the prevailing conditions. To prevent this, bureaucratic hurdles to calling such a congress were erected. The PMAC threw its weight behind the minority loyalist faction which remained in control of CELU's headquarters, and worked to prevent a general congress from being held until such a time that the outcome could be

expected to be more favourable. Union leaders from Eritrea – who generally sided with the militant opposition – where denied permission to travel to Addis Ababa to attend meetings[120]. With the Eritrean unions unable to actively participate in central matters, it fell upon unions clustered in and around Addis Ababa – who for long had been networked in a regional coordinating committee – to spearhead the radical opposition. In place of a general congress, they called a meeting of this committee. About 100 unions in and around Addis Ababa elected a committee leadership headed by Marqos Hagos, a radical trade union leader from the insurance industry (Kiflu 1993: 217).

The Addis Ababa unions continued to push for a General Assembly meeting. By March 1975 Alem Abdi had forbidden their committee to meet in CELU's offices. In response, the delegates detained him in the building, triggering the intervention of state security. In May they again prevented him from entering the compound. This appears to have been the final straw for the military rulers, demonstrating the inability of Alem's leadership to reassert control. The PMAC closed down the CELU headquarters altogether and banned union meetings. In its statement announcing the closure, the PMAC bluntly stated that the 'so-called CELU' had 'outlived its usefulness, [and had] no place in Socialist Ethiopia' (*EH* 1975b). Only a few days afterwards, however, the PMAC rescinded[121] its decision. Open protests and strong opposition from unions and workers whom the PMAC canvassed for support apparently convinced the PMAC to reverse its position (Kailembo 1975). Permission to finally hold fresh elections was also granted, spelling an end to Alem Abdi's influence.

A Provisional Workers' Committee (PWC) headed by Marqos Hagos was elected on a May 31 – June 1 meeting, and was mandated to lead CELU until a congress of the General Assembly could be held (*EH* 1975c; 1975d). The elections were reported to have taken place in 'good order' with minimum state presence – represented by only one security officer. It appeared, to informers of the US embassy in Addis Ababa (1975), to demonstrate that 'democratic processes were being

[120] The Eritrean unions would eventually manage to send representatives to the September 1975 congress of CELU's GA (*EH* 1975e).

[121] In a rather apologetic tone contrasting with the PMAC's statement from the week before, an *Ethiopian Herald* writer (Rahel 1975) claimed that '[the] temporary closure of the headquarters of the Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions last month was mistaken by some to be an indication of the government to emasculate organised labour'. This, the writer rather unconvincingly assured the reader, 'of course, was a totally erroneous assumption' as demonstrated by later events.

followed'[122]. This election marked the radical oppositional movement's seizure of formal control over CELU, but unlike its characterisation in some of the literature[123] the new leadership was not by any means composed of infiltrating external agents or newcomers to the labour movement. Rather, the PWC was largely made up of experienced workers' representatives and veteran trade unionists. The five-man committee that was elected to preside over the May-June meeting included 'three trade unionists of established reputation', including Elias Mengesha of HVA, Shumiye Teferra of Hilton Hotel, and Ibrahim Ahmed of Amropa Motors (US embassy in Addis Ababa 1975), in addition to the chairman Marqos Hagos, who himself had been an elected workers' representative and a member of CELU's General Council for many years by that time. The roster of the PWC included the same names joined by a number of even more seasoned trade unionists. They included Vice Chairman Mesfin Abraha, who had for long been the senior-most CELU official in Eritrea, as well as the experienced leaders of two trading and retail companies' unions – Gebremichael Gebremedhin of Mosvold and Getachew Amare of A. Besse (CELU 1975a).

The election of the PWC resulted in the creation of a certain amount of space in which a relatively autonomous movement could operate without much direct state intervention. Indeed, in the resolution (CELU 1975a) the PWC passed upon its establishment it hailed the 'glowing struggles [which had driven] out the reactionary elements who were the enemies of the working class and [reinstated] CELU under the direction and control of the toiling masses'. This, it stated, constituted 'the historic occasion of the rebirth of the CELU into a democratic organisation'. The resolution 'strongly warned' the PMAC against repeating the closure of its offices, demanded the release of its arrested leaders and an end to the exercise of censorship over its publications. It denounced the management of the nationalised corporations and demanded that workers, 'through leaders of their own choosing, in an atmosphere of equality of freedom' were allowed to participate in the management of these enterprises. It further called for government inspectors to leave state enterprises in order for a democratic workplace atmosphere to be created; an end to the wage-freeze policy which the PMAC had imposed; the establishment of a minimum wage; and the promulgation of a new progressive labour law, to include provisions for job security, extensive social security, the abolishment and replacement of the LRB; and the free organisation of all

[122] Fissehatsion Tekie (1983, interview with Tom Killion) too, testifies that Marqos' group had the support of the majority.
[123] Discussed in chapter 2.

workers. The US embassy in Addis Ababa reported that the resolution contained 'the first specific appearance of [a] communist line' (Wyman 1975a)[124]. Probably most unpalatable to US officials was the announcement of CELU's disaffiliation from ICFTU, the eviction of the ICFTU and AALC offices from CELU's premises, and the denouncements that accompanied it. By now CELU was tilting towards positions taken by the clandestine leftist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party[125] (EPRP), and although no formal alliance was ever proclaimed a certain convergence of views was to become apparent[126].

Organisationally, the PWC was successful in re-establishing and expanding the network of unions in the months that followed. In Kiflu's (2014, personal interview) assessment, the three months that followed was 'the first time in Ethiopian history that there was an independent [confederation]'. Its autonomy and combativeness enabled it to attract large numbers of hitherto non-organised workers and establish new unions. This much was reluctantly admitted by the US ambassador (Hummel 1975a), who reported that although '[the] PWC is suffering internal strains and rivalries [it] seems to be making some progress towards its stated objective of re-establishing CELU HQs as genuine national centre for affiliated unions and workers'. The PWC's three-month report submitted in advance of the September 1975 General Assembly meeting, noted that inroads had been made in new sectors – for example, in organising tailors and sewers, tea house and bar employees, taxi and tractor chauffeurs, and mission employees – in the process establishing 41 unions consisting of 8 500 workers, while also reviving a number of dormant unions and recruiting additional members to existing unions (CELU 1975c). Progress was also made in political terms, in acquiring the release of imprisoned former CELU leaders and obtaining official permission to hold a general congress.

[124] Mesfin Gebremichael of the old CELU leadership is quoted as having told the embassy that four technical advisors led by Kiflu Tadesse and Girmachew Lemma were responsible for drafting the CELU resolution attacking the PMAC, but another member of the ousted CELU leadership - Gebreselassie Gebremariam - adds that 'many of those elected do indeed oppose the [PMAC]' (Wyman 1975b). Mesfin would not have known that Kiflu and Girmachew were EPRP members at the time. Kiflu (2014, personal interview) agrees that Girmachew probably drafted the resolution.

[125] The EPRP had still not announced its existence, but the existence of a pole organised around its popular *Democracia* newsletter was becoming apparent.

[126] Note however, that while the EPRP's signature demand for a provisional people's government was featured in the September 1974 resolution – a full year before the emergence of that party – that particular demand was conspicuously absent from both the June and September 1975 resolutions. The perception, evident in much of the literature, that CELU had become little more than an EPRP front organisation by the mid-1975, does not take this fact into account.

The GA congress held in September 1975 testified to the level of support the radical leadership had acquired. The hitherto provisional leadership was re-elected on a regular term, and judging by the content of the resolutions (CELU 1975b) it was on an explicitly Marxist platform[127]. Although obviously unsympathetic to this platform, the US embassy's cables reported home about a legitimate process and an outcome consistent with the prevailing mood of the membership. 'CELU's rank-and-file was well represented at its General Assembly by individual union leaders' it stated, 'and we have no doubt that the resolution's bread and butter demands accurately expressed labour's needs' (Hummel 1975e)[128]. The resolutions passed, however, included demands that were deemed 'obviously unacceptable' to the PMAC (Hummel 1975b). Most of these demands were similar to the ones that had been raised in the May resolution – and subsequently ignored – but they were now restated in a more assertive manner (CELU 1975b). The resolution expressed adherence to a popular democratic form of socialism and strong opposition to the prevailing authoritarianism and state capitalism. It demanded the reestablishment of civil and democratic rights – including the right to demonstrate and to strike, and the release of arrested progressives. Having had its previous demands for the democratisation of workplace relations ignored, CELU now called for the full removal of state-owned enterprises' management, and their replacement, across the board, with workers' representatives. In the case of its demands not being met within a month's time, it threatened that 'all necessary measures' would be taken. As the PMAC's rejection of these demands was somewhat of a foregone conclusion, and as this rejection could be expected to entail repressive measures, the CELU resolution included a provision that any harassment or repression would automatically trigger the activation of a general strike. To this end, preparations were made for a strike leadership to take charge in the event of arrests. But as subsequent events would bear out, the preparations were insufficient.

The state responded in style. In an infamous event security forces were called to arrest distributors of leaflets containing the resolution at Addis Ababa's Bole International Airport. They found several hundred Ethiopian Airlines employees who, according to the government, 'tried to obstruct the officers performing their duty, refused to disperse peacefully, and in fact encircled the security officers' (ILO 1975). In what followed 'a dozen' (Ottaway and Ottaway, 1978: 9) workers were

[127] In that same month, a special issue of *Voice of Labour* consisting of a study compendium of *The Communist Manifesto* was issued.

[128] The number of unions represented at the GA, furthermore, was deemed to indicate the extent to which the PWC 'had done its work well in re-establishing links between affiliated unions and national centre' (Hummel 1975b).

massacred, while many more were beaten and teargassed[129]. The repression and violence spread through the capital rapidly. The ICFTU assistant general secretary reported that 'over a hundred people have been shot and it is reported that some 1 600 people have been arrested'. The arrested included Marqos Hagos, and 'most of the 12 members of CELU's Executive Committee', who were allegedly also 'terribly beaten up' (Luyimbazi 1976). Moreover, security agents attempted to track down each of the GA delegates and the 175 union representatives that had signed the resolution, arresting most of them (Vanderveken 1976). Workplaces were combed by agents aiming to identify rank-and-file workers who had been absent, with those deemed to be participants and instigators 'arrested, beaten and reportedly shot' (Hummel 1975b). In the course of the strike an explosion occurred outside the Addis Ababa telecommunications office, where the workforce was known for its strong opposition to the PMAC[130]. Although Kiflu (2014, personal interview) denies that CELU or EPRP were involved in the incident, it was seized upon by the PMAC as another pretext for clamping down on the labour movement. CELU was banned, and a state of emergency was declared: strikes, slowdowns, public assembly and distribution of leaflets were prohibited. This was enforced in the strictest manner as security forces were granted the right to shoot offenders on sight (*EH* 1975h; Clapham 1990: 55). In Akaki, a number of detained strikers were reportedly killed in front of their fellow workers so as 'to teach [them] a lesson' (Kiflu 2014, personal interview[131]). What remained of CELU's leadership went underground.

The strike, meanwhile, was left without a coordinating body and failed to rally a critical mass. The US embassy in Addis Ababa (Hummel 1975b) described the manner in which it unravelled. 'In the wake of [the Ethiopian Airlines] incident', it reported, 'strike call was assumed by some, but others awaited notification'. As a result, 'hesitation, confusion and lack of communications doomed action from start'. But the call to strike was far from universally ignored. Workers of Moenco, Crown Cork, Sabean Metals, Darmar Shoes, and Ethiopian Airlines, among others, were reported to have walked out from work, and wildcat strikes continued for a full week at workplaces

[129] The official number of casualties was 4, while the number of injured was 29 (*EH* 1975f). In the government's account of events, the soldiers responded to 'someone from the crowd [firing] a shot at them' (ILO 1975).
[130] As late as March 11, 1977, an article published in *Ethiopian Herald*'s 'Revolutionary Forum' column ostensibly written by a telecommunication worker, found it necessary to exhort colleagues to 'clean our unions from EPRP traitors' (Tele Progressive 1977).
[131] Note also that Fissehatsion Tekie (1983, interview with Tom Killion) corroborates this claim by stating that the pro-PMAC labour leader of the Indo-Ethiopian Textile factory's union, located in the area, was 'responsible for the massacre of workers'.

such as the Berhanena Selam Printing Press, Addis Tyre Company, Addis Shoe Factory, Fiat Company, Lazaridis Company, Addis Ababa's grain storage depot, Ethiopian Cider, Cement factory, Sadaolin Paints, Vaskin Company, and among petroleum workers, bank workers and insurance employees (Hummel 1975c; 1975d; 1975e). The US embassy (Hummel 1975b) estimated that between 8 000 and 10 000 workers participated in the strike, but this figure is considered far too low by Kiflu (2014, personal interview) who estimates that 'a minimum of between 80 and 120 unions took part in the strike'. Much like what was reported about the radical labour movement in previous times, it has also been claimed that participation in the September 1975 strike was relatively greater among white-collar workers. 'Those who eventually walked off their jobs seem to come primarily from labour's most regarded elite', a US embassy cable read (Hummel 1975e). But the cable also noted that the September 1975 strike was 'the first time that substantial numbers of workers have translated their opposition to the [PMAC] into overt and united action'. According to Kiflu (2014, personal interview), the strike attracted as much blue-collar support as white-collar. This included 'fierce support' throughout the Akaki industrial area, where the strike call ostensibly was most successful, and strikes continued for three to four days.

Reeling from the blows suffered, radical workers and labour leaders began to rebuild a clandestine network of committees to coordinate activity. The experience of networking to augment pressures on the PMAC earlier that year provided a blue-print for constructing new clandestine structures. These consisted of rapidly multiplying groups of labour activists coordinated by a clandestine CELU Resurrection Committee. Funds were gathered to support the dependents of arrested workers and labour leaders, and a network was created that could coordinate resistance against attempts to impose control over the movement. By December 1975, Kiflu (2014, personal interview) claims, 'a very large organisation' had been created, 'even stronger than before'[132]. At around this time, EPRP activists in the labour movement, and radical workers that had become sympathetic to its line, formed the Ethiopian Workers' Revolutionary Union (ELAMA)[133]. ELAMA constituted a separate organisational structure with horizontal attachments to the EPRP structures. Its establishment generated both an organisational asset for radicalised workers that

[132] Notably, the organisation even came to publish its own clandestine newspaper, *CELU Resurrection* (Kiflu 2016).
[133] The organisation is known by its Amharic acronym ELAMA, which reads የኢትዮጵያ ላባደሮች አብዮታዊ ማኅበር, literally translating to Ethiopian Proletarians' Revolutionary Association, but since the translation Ethiopian Workers' Revolutionary Union has been used elsewhere (Kiflu 1998), this translation will also be used here.

were prepared to continue to resist state impositions, and a political asset for the EPRP that allowed it to recruit workers in large numbers, providing it with a source of some of its most dedicated militants (Kiflu 1998).

4.6 Confrontation and subjugation

In December 1975 a new labour law was finally proclaimed. As noted in chapter 3 it was geared towards the imposition of industrial and institutional control rather than empowering workers. In addition to severely restricting collective labour rights, the proclamation made the abolishment of CELU formal and final, and stipulated its replacement with a new structure that was yet to emerge: the All-Ethiopia Trade Union (AETU). If there were any doubts as to the nature of the labour regime the proclamation aimed to usher in, official rhetoric, illustrated in an *Ethiopian Herald* (1975g) editorial entitled 'Do more, ask less' clarified it. 'Under the canon now in force', it read 'organised labour is no longer saddled with the burdensome [sic!] task of airing workers' grievances and engaging in invariably acrimonious wrangling with invariably materialist management'. Rather, workers' representatives were now expected to 'bring their weight to bear on other areas where action is of the essence… meaning, essentially, *hard work* [emphasis added] for the common good'. 'Then and only then', it claimed 'will organised labour find justification'. In another editorial, it was stated that 'discipline is more indispensable than the luxury of "democracy"'. The US ambassador in Addis Ababa (Hummel 1975f) opined that the law, 'stripped of its socialist jargon', was essentially 'moderate', while the EPRP and ELAMA labelled the labour proclamation a 'proclamation of slavery' (ELAMA 1976; Kiflu 1998). Its promulgation has been interpreted as having sounded the death knell for the labour movement as an autonomous force (Killion 1985; Ottaway and Ottaway 1978). However, this could not be achieved by legislation alone, but would require meticulous scrutinising and culling of eligible candidates, recurrent purges and re-elections, and heavy repression that would continue over the next couple of years. The immediate results of the dissolution of CELU was, on the one hand, that the focal point of conflict now shifted to the process of purging oppositional labour leaders in the basic unions and their replacement with candidates deemed more loyal, and, on the other, a gradual displacement of opposition into clandestine structures.

Through the autumn of 1975, the spring, and the summer of 1976 ELAMA coordinated a campaign demanding respect for labour and democratic rights, an end to state interference in union elections,

and the release of the imprisoned labour leaders. This campaign generated a flurry of defiant petitions and protest notes, stamped and signed by unions, representatives and workers[134]. The campaign included convincing workers to refuse to re-register their unions according to the requirements of the new labour law, or to hold fresh elections. As the protest and petition movement was conducted by and carried the seals of basic unions, or in some cases simply signatures of workers, the campaign appeared to be spontaneous rather than coordinated by clandestine structures. In March 1976, PMAC conceded to pressure to release a number of imprisoned labour leaders, including Marqos Hagos, Beyene Solomon[135] and Fissehatsion Tekie (*EH* 1976a), in time to enable union elections to be held before the stipulated deadline expired. This, however, proved to be the last major concession extracted, as the PMAC was preparing to pacify the labour movement once and for all.

In the PMAC's attempts to enhance its influence and ability to penetrate new social layers, the Provisional Office for Mass Organisational Affairs (POMOA) had an important role to play. POMOA – formally established in April 1976 – was intended to constitute a platform for the part of the civilian left that was willing to work with the PMAC. It also intended to provide the latter with a cadre that could extend its social reach and assist it in establishing and asserting influence over masses and mass organisations. POMOA was overwhelmingly led and staffed by cadres and sympathisers of the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (AESM[136]) and, to a lesser degree, several smaller Marxist-Leninist groups[137], which all had their own reasons for wanting to establish influence over the labour movement. POMOA played an important role in drafting the 1975 labour proclamation – which a MEISON official (Frewe 1980: 5) would describe as 'one of the most important landmarks of the Ethiopian revolution' – and in reorganising the unruly labour movement. Jealous of EPRP's influence within the labour movement, the POMOA-aligned groups saw the restructuring of the labour movement as an opportunity to gain that precious foothold among the labouring masses that their Marxist-Leninist credentials required.

[134] See, among the plenty examples in the CETU archives, letters from Various unions (1976a) and Workers' Union of the National Tobacco and Match Corporation (1976) to PMAC.
[135] Beyene would later be re-arrested and spend several additional years in prison. He was released in 1981.
[136] This organisation is often referred to according to its Amharic acronym: *MEISON*
[137] *Waz* (Labour) League, Ethiopian Oppressed Peoples' Struggle, Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Organisation, and, at a later stage, Revolutionary *Seded* (flame).

From April 1976 onwards, participation in workplace discussion clubs known as Workers' Revolutionary Forums was made mandatory for all employees, ostensibly to facilitate 'free and democratic exchange of views' (*EH* 1976b). In reality, they direct to guide the election of 'correct' representatives, to disseminate official policy among workers, all the while identifying and exposing oppositional workers. A painstaking process of exposing and weeding out 'anarchists' and 'reactionaries' within the workforce in general and among labour representatives in particular ensued. The 'guided' elections of labour leaders to the emerging structures of the AETU proceeded in tandem with this process. Despite the 'coercive manner' (Tienken 1976e) under which the process proceeded, it proved very difficult to ensure that the desired representatives were chosen. This is evidenced by the high number of incidents of dismissal, arrest and even execution of union leaders; cancellations of election results; forced re-elections; broken up meetings; arrest of participants; and postponements (*EH* 1976d; 1976e; 1976f; 1976g; 1976h; 1977b; 1977e; 1977f; Kiflu 2014, personal interview). Workers in constituent unions and industrial federations would be summoned to seminars, were the opposition was denounced and the desirable electoral outcome was indicated. However, through a combination of workers' intransigence and ELAMA coordination, elections could either not be held or, frequently, resulted in the re-election of the very same representatives that they were meant to replace (Kiflu 2014, personal interview). In the case of the re-organisational congress of the federation of manufacturing workers, for example, 200 out of 250 delegates walked out of the meeting. Subsequent attempts led to turmoil, fist fights and the arrest of eleven delegates – some of whom were imprisoned for years and some of whom were later executed (Kiflu 2014, personal interview). The frustrations experienced by authorities are described by Alemu Abebe (2014, personal interview):

> *The platform was still open, and there were not enough [pro-government] candidates to be promoted. What kind of leadership [that was elected] was not guaranteed [and] it was not possible to manipulate it. So [on a] platform organised by the government an opposing leadership [came] into place. Because even though [the government] created the legal framework [with a different intent], the people who [were elected] were still those that the labourers knew.*

Condemnations in state media makes clear that slow-downs, strikes, sabotages and other forms of industrial unrest were occurring with such a frequency that it evidently was considered a pressing problem. The labour proclamation and the wrangling over control it had set in motion had only aggravated this problem. Nor were the workers' forums always successful in bringing workers into

line. May Day demonstrations 1976 saw ranks of workers raising oppositional demands – on banners smuggled in and unfolded on Addis Ababa's main parading square[138] – and armed repression. According to Kiflu (2014, personal interview) 'many were arrested and killed' in this incident, while Andargachew (2000: 339) claims that security officers – allegedly responding to a shot that had been fired from the demonstration – opened fire and killed around 20 demonstrating workers, wounding many more. On May 28, 1976, *Ethiopian Herald* voiced exasperation that 'there can be no escaping the fact that there are instances of where undue advantage is being taken of the opportunity provided by the discussion forums [,] so much so, in fact, that [POMOA] has just found it expedient to express – in no unmistakable terms – its dismay over this unfortunate drift'. The next day, PMAC issued a strong warning in response to its alleged understanding that 'some discussion forums have been turned into tools serving the interests of reactionaries desirous of causing production slow-downs' (*EH* 1976m). But labour unrest continued unabated through the spring and summer of 1976. In July, the US embassy (Tienken 1976a) reported that postal office workers in Addis Ababa were protesting and demanding the release of their arrested union leaders. Port workers in Eritrea, sugar estate workers at the Wonji sugar factory, and casual coffee-cleaning workers were among others who were reported to have been involved in unrest.

The state responded to such frustrations with increasing levels of violence. Executions of suspected EPRP members had begun in 1976, and open confrontation with the latter was becoming increasingly likely. By the autumn the labour movement became embroiled in the violence. At around the same time the EPRP began to assassinate PMAC, POMOA and MEISON cadre it alleged were responsible for the heightened repression. The debate on the relative responsibility is neither resolvable nor relevant here[139], but Kiflu's claim that it was the PMAC's inability to subordinate the labour movement that constituted the immediate trigger of the so-called 'red terror' campaign of the state is noteworthy (2014, personal interview) – if only because it calls to attention the central role of the labour movement in the convulsions that Ethiopia was in the midst of.

[138] Pictures from the demonstrations show participants marching across Revolution Square having unfurled a large banner proclaiming 'CELU and ELAMA are companions in the struggle' (Abyot 1980: 13). Markakis and Nega (1978) refers to 'numerous placards' demanding the establishment of a provisional people's government, and Kiflu (2014, personal interview) claims that while the demonstrating workers had been carrying government-approved placards in the procession to the square, 'almost all of them' replaced them with concealed placards displaying oppositional demands on entering the square.

[139] See for instance Halliday and Molyneux (1981); Lefort (1983); Kiflu (1998), Negede (2014), Fikreselassie (2014), and Fisseha (2015).

According to this interpretation, mass repression was initially launched against the labour movement in Dire Dawa during the summer of 1976. Correspondence from Dire Dawa and its twin city Harar through 1975 and 1976 seems to corroborate the notion that the levels of unrest and harassment of the labour movement was particularly severe there, with frequent strikes, layoffs and arrests of labour leaders and workers (Various unions 1975; 'All Harar proletarians' 1976; Various unions 1976b). But whatever the merits of the argument above, mass repression was within short to replace administrative measures as the preferred means of subjugating the oppositional labour movement throughout the country.

Meanwhile, the state went to great lengths to assure that new and loyal structures were formed. The weeding out of opposition and the identification of reliable candidates was only one side of this process – the other was the wholesale reorganisation of the unions and federations in anticipation of the re-foundation of a national centre. Re-elections, as noted however, continued to create undesirable outcomes. Out of eight federations which elected new leaderships in June 1976, half had been replaced – by intimidation or forceful eviction – by the end of that year. The federation of banking and insurance workers had refused to partake altogether, and therefore had not elected any new leadership in the first place. Despite heavy efforts, only the leadership of four out of nine federations were deemed sufficiently reliable to participate in the foundation of a new confederation (Tienken 1976f). In December 1976, MoLSA called a meeting of trade union leaders in the town of Ambo, quite some distance away from the ferment of the urban and industrial arena, and 'free from any possible lobbying by union members' (Tienken 1976f). This meeting was attended by the full crop of the political leadership at the time, including PMAC Chairman Mengistu Hailemariam and the POMOA leadership. The session evolved into the founding congress of AETU, which officially occurred in January 1977, after sufficient preparations and assessments had made sure that only vetted loyalist leaders were present. As a result of the stringent requirements of the vetting procedure, only 65 representatives partook in the congress, and out of the names on the roster, few, if any, were recognisable as prominent or experienced union leaders. Those unions and federations that had yet failed to generate loyal and vetted candidates were denied representation at the congress (Tienken 1976f; 1977). Alemu Abebe (2014, personal interview), has described the difficulties encountered by the organisers in terms of having insufficient time 'to manoeuvre' since the confederation could not viably be banned indefinitely.

‘It was [only] later on that [the authorities] started penetrating the lower level trade unions’, he affirmed.

September 1976 marked the last serious attempt by the oppositional labour movement to resolve the conflict industrially and politically, even if now also enhanced with insurrectionary tactics and means[140]. Repression and arrests had taken its toll on the movement in the preceding months and in many places the structures of the movement had already been depleted or rendered defunct. Having concluded that it was facing destruction if things proceeded along the prevailing trajectory, ELAMAs third congress decided to call a general strike as a last desperate throw of the dice (Kiflu 2014, personal interview). In response to the general strike call, the PMAC released a statement warning that it had ordered security forces ‘to take appropriate revolutionary measures on the spot against all those individuals and/or groups who either instigate work stoppage or go on strike’. ‘All anti-revolutionary forces who trade on the struggle of workers’, it vowed, ‘will perish’ (*EH* 1976i). The strike took place in the immediate aftermath of a failed assassination attempt on PMAC's chairman Mengistu Hailemariam which reinforced the state's commitment to rub it out whatever the costs. The US embassy in Addis Ababa estimated (Tienken 1976c) that around 500-650 persons were arrested during the week that followed and that between 20 and 50 ‘were killed September 22-23 as [a] result of strikes, demonstrations and stoning of buses’. The violence included seemingly random atrocities, such as the killing of seven in a raid on a popular hotel, but it also entailed systematic and targeted repression, including the execution of somewhere between 100 and 600 of the arrested strikers and protestors (Tienken 1976c). Before the strike was smothered US embassy cables (Tienken 1976b; 1976d) reported that it had effectively caused power and water supply failures in parts of Addis Ababa as well as partial transportation stoppages. Strikes, which occurred ‘throughout the city’, included those of bank, utility and transportation workers, as well as workers at the tobacco monopoly and at two national textile factories. Shootings and stone throwing were reported across the city for several days, but in face of the tense atmosphere and the heavy repression that prevailed, the momentum could not be sustained.

[140] The compelling interpretation that the planned September 1976 general strike amounted to an insurrection attempt is Alemu Abebe's (2014 personal interview). Kiflu (2014 personal interview) disagrees with this characterisation claiming that the decision to call a strike was taken by a committee of workers' representative that had no prior knowledge of a coinciding assassination attempt on Mengistu Hailemariam. Either way, had a general strike – reinforced by demonstrations and armed activity – been successful, it would likely have amounted to an insurrection.

After the failure of the strike, conventional industrial unrest and contestation began to peter out (Tienken 1976f). It became less difficult for state agents and allies to achieve desirable electoral outcomes in the reorganisation of remaining unions and federations – although not yet all – as anything resembling opposition was now considered a serious crime, and since most of those identified as radical labour activists either had been arrested or had gone underground. The imprisoned allegedly included 'thousands of 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation labour leaders' (Kiflu 2014, personal interview). Coordinated resistance, in this environment, was no longer viable and a number of additional criteria was introduced to safeguard that only vetted representatives were elected at the various levels. Instead and aside of dispersed resistance, the contradictions still very prevalent came to express themselves increasingly in armed conflict. Workplaces were militarised and workers deemed loyal were organised in pro-government militias, armed and unleashed on perceived enemies within and outside their own ranks. Oppositional workers were a primary target of these militias and other security forces, and the campaign to expose and weed out real and imagined opponents within the workforce was intensified. In workplace after workplace across the country, 'mercenaries', 'anarchists', and 'reactionaries' were identified, denounced, imprisoned and, with increasing frequency, executed (*EH* 1976j; 1976k; 1976l; 1977a; 5/3/77; 1977c; 1977d; 1977g; 1977h; 1977i).

The opposition also militarised its strategy. Workers played a prominent role in the EPRP's urban military squads, and ELAMA established its own armed squads (Kiflu 1998; 2014, personal interview). Victims were claimed on both sides, although the opposition bore the brunt. A US embassy cable from March 1977 (Tienken 1977) portrays a war-like situation in the Akaki industrial area, where workers organised in opposing constellations were involved in hostilities that included assassinations and the use of explosive devices[141]. Indeed, March was to become a bloody month for the radical labour movement as well as the opposition in general. In one of the most infamous incidents of the revolution, ELAMA central committee member and Berhanena Selam Printing Press union representative Daro Negash, who was eight months pregnant at the time, and eight colleagues from the printing press whom had allegedly been identified as 'anarchists' in the workers' discussion club, were killed by an armed squad working under the

[141] From a more partisan angle, the EPRP Foreign Committee's journal *Abyot* (1977) claimed that in that very month, state atrocities against workers in Addis Ababa alone included the killing of 25 employees of the cement factory; 15 employees of the Lazaridis company; 20 employees of Indo-Ethiopian textile factory; 5 customs employees; 7 railway workers; 23 workers of the Pepsi Cola factory; and an unknown number of weaving workers in the Kolfe district.

order of a local Urban Dweller's Association[142] chairman[143] (*EH* 1977j). The same month David Ottaway (1977) reported the following for the *Washington Post*:

> *The government's arming of workers and the neighbourhood associations immediately led to bloody strife last week in the Akaki industrial sector of the city and to widespread night-time shootings. Unconfirmed reports said that as many as 70 workers died in fighting inside half a dozen factories… Meanwhile, six more assassinated labour officials were buried here this weekend.*

May Day celebrations in 1977 – called by ELAMA the day before the occasion in order to circumvent expected suppression – turned into the single-most bloody episode of the urban violence of the period. Protesters were met by machine-gun equipped jeeps firing into the crowds and demonstrators rounded up were summarily executed the very same night. Estimates vary over the number of dead, which range between several hundreds and over a thousand (Markakis and Nega 1978). Although far from all, or even the majority, of the victims of this massacre were organised workers, it is telling that the episode occurred in response to demonstrations for the international workers' day called by a workers' organisation. Exposures and purges would go on for several years, but at the end of 1977, what was left of the oppositional labour movement that had emerged in the 1960s, seized control of CELU in 1975, and parts of which had joined ELAMA's campaign in the aftermath of the banning of CELU, was vanquished and destroyed.

Aside from scores of other workers and representatives, the militarised struggle in and over the labour movement took the lives of the last chairman of CELU, Marqos Hagos, and the first two chairmen of AETU, Tewodros Bekele and Temesgen Madebo – the former killed by agents of the state and the two latter both assassinated by ELAMA squads. Apart from the chairmen, AETU's treasurer Kebede Gebremichael; first deputy vice president, Gezahegn Kassahoun; vice president, Gezahegn Teklearegay; and executive committee member, Kebede Tekle also perished. Other victims of executions and assassination included Tessema Deressa, secretary general of the PWC and representative of the Awash Valley Project union; Ali Hussein, PWC member[144] and union

[142] Known by their Amharic name, *Kebeles*.
[143] The public outrage the killings sparked and other atrocious excesses of the squad proved too much for the PMAC: its members – as well as the two colleagues of the murdered from Berhanena Selam Printing Press, who had 'identified' them and called on the squad – were themselves in turn executed. See Wiebel (2014) for a broader contextualisation and discussion of the meaning of this incident within the campaign of state-sanctioned terror.
[144] A fourth PWC member, Mekonnen Tesfaye, was reportedly executed in a later round of purges of MEISON-affiliated labour activists. Mekonnen was the assistant general secretary of the PWC, representing the union of Addis Ababa Cement Factory.

representative of the Indo-Ethiopian Textile Factory; Tsegaye Yehwalashet, secretary of the Transport and Communication Workers federation; Teferra, chairman of Electricity, Water and Gas Workers Federation; Wondimu Woldemedhin, first deputy chairman of the manufacturing industry workers' federation; Ademe Seifu, president of the Metahara Sugar Factory Workers' Union; Orion Adamutu, vice chairman of the plastics factory workers' union; and Kassahun Ambaye, chairman of the union of Awassa Farm Development Enterprise (Negede 2014: 253; Beyene 2010: 170-171; Fikreselassie 2014: 290; Kiflu 2014, personal interview; Andergachew 2000: 409). At the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, victims of assassination included Permanent Secretary Guetnet Zewde – allegedly an important officer in the reorganisation of and wresting control over the trade unions (Tienken 1976e) – and section head Zewdu Alemayehu (Fikreselassie 2014). The dead rank-and-file members of the Ethiopian labour movement are too plenty to mention. That the violence of the period involved workers to a particularly marked degree is something that is agreed upon by former POMOA officials as well as EPRP leaders (Negede 1980: 7; Kiflu 1993; 1998; 2014, personal interview; 2016). The PMAC chairman too, seemed to reflect this view when, decrying 'infiltrators' of the labour movements that had 'inflicted heavy damages', he spoke of the 'death blow' dealt to them by 'revolutionary defence squads in residential areas as well as in production centres' (Mengistu 1982: 36).

Despite the defeat of organised labour opposition, dispersed troubles remained or re-emerged in the basic unions. More purges were also to follow as the POMOA coalition broke apart, one group at a time. First, MEISON-affiliated trade unionists and representatives were weeded out, removed, arrested, and sometimes killed. Subsequently, those affiliated with remaining smaller parties were subjected to the same procedure. On May 25, 1978 the full membership of the executive committee of AETU was dismissed and replaced (Walker 1978). This led to another round of purges in the basic unions that entailed violent repression too. At the Metahara sugar factory, for example, the AETU (1978) readily reported that an unstated number of 'right roaders'[145] in the leadership of the union and revolutionary guard committee had been ousted, subjected to a newly established 'Red Terror Committee', and had 'revolutionary measures' taken against them. Senior MEISON leader Negede Gobezie (2014: 253) lists over 600 MEISON-affiliated workers and labour leaders who were purged, imprisoned or executed in this round of repression. Amongst those killed were

[145] The derogatory label used for MEISON in the aftermath of its falling out with the PMAC.

the leaderships of the Dire Dawa textile and cement factories, as well as 15 officials from the Wonji sugar factory union and the chairman of a union in the city of Nazret[146]. This repression led a MEISON official (Frewe 1980: 7-9) to claim that 'the vanguard elements and elected leaders [of the working class] have been thrown in the [PMAC]'s prisons in their thousands'. Alemu Abebe (2014, personal interview) has noted that 'the moment MEISON went underground, [the labour movement] was taken over by another organisation with *literally with no resistance* [emphasis added]', but this seems only partially accurate. In the aftermath of the purge, the AETU (1978) reported still having had to address labour unrest, sabotage and subversion at the basic unions of Metahara sugar factory, Wonji plantations, the Fibre factory, CBE, Upper Awash Agricultural Development Enterprise, church-owned enterprises, and Edget yarn factory.

In November 1978 a new round of arrests were reported to have been made in AETU's headquarters, as another couple of smaller Marxist-Leninist groups had fallen out of official favour. In December that same year, it was followed by another purge of the full leadership of the AETU, and two officials were reported to have been shot (Chapin 1979a). The reasons reported for this purge were related to another bout of inter-party competition over control of AETU, but also that the ousted leadership had proven insufficiently enthusiastic in preparing the workers for the 'extensive sacrifices' that the upcoming National Revolutionary Development Campaign would require. 'The failure of the AETU leadership to cooperate fully', according to the US ambassador (Chapin 1979b), 'was seriously threatening the government's ability to impose its will upon the workers', indicating that whatever residues of autonomy that had remained were now removed[147]. This time, it appears, no resistance was registered from the rank-and-file. In fact, Ethiopian workers with whom the embassy reported to have been in contact with were resigned about 'the seeming impossibility of any real labour union representation' and 'well aware of the extensive political manipulation by the government of the AETU'. 'There is a widespread feeling that the organisation is a charade', the ambassador concluded. Indeed, by the early 1980s not many independent-minded labour leaders remained in high positions. It was around this time that the 1982 trade union law described in the previous chapter was passed, openly turning AETU into 'streamlined and reorganised' structures 'responsive to the leadership of [COPWE]'. This

[146] Contemporarily known as Adama.
[147] This conclusion was also drawn by the Department of State (1980: 70), which claimed that by 1979 'the modest level of independence enjoyed by unionists even a year ago has disappeared', with the unions now having become '*entirely* [emphasis added] controlled by the government, and serve only to mobilise and control workers'.

coincided with another purge of the AETU leadership and the installation of Tadesse Tamrat as chairman, a trade unionist from the Indo-Ethiopian/Akaki Textile Factory – that was to lead the confederation until 1991.

At the tail end of the first cycle a new degree of control over the labour movement, hitherto unseen in scope, had been established. Unlike earlier stages this phase was marked by 'more or less absolute control' over its structures. In the late 1970s, according to Alemu Abebe (2014, personal interview) 'everything [was] manipulated – there [was] no room for mistakes'. 'Before anybody [was] nominated', he explains, 'he [was] scrutinised'. The structures had for all essential purposes been rendered impenetrable to and insulated from opposition, militant labour activism and rank-and-file pressure alike.

4.7 Constraining factors

As would have been predicted from the review of the literature it appears that bureaucratisation was a factor that affected the Ethiopian labour movement through most of the cycle. With the emergence of a leadership with no direct links to, or origins in, any constituent unions, and materially and socially quite radically separated from the rank-and-file, bureaucratism was an essential aspect of CELU's features from the outset. In the sense that the top officials were neither representative of any unions, nor, in most cases, possessing any direct experience of wage work prior to being employed by the confederation, the process of bureaucratisation within CELU was quite extraordinary. The fact that the number of top officials was relatively small does not change the fact that they were greatly privileged – socially and materially. FTOs and staff members co-opted into the leadership wielded a significant amount of power over the confederation as well as the basic unions. And they used it consistently to arrest, subvert and purge radicalism and militancy. Whether their pragmatism was determined by the privilege that came with office or not was initially a moot point. After the ouster of Abraham Mekonnen and the death of Aberra Gemu it appeared evident that meaningful assertiveness would lead to removal from office in any case, and top labour and state officials were eager to repeatedly point out that it was likely to result in the forced dissolution of CELU altogether (Robinson 1963; Morehous 1969: 75). In appearance, external pressures would seemingly fuse privileged bureaucratic interests with the institutional need of defending the organisation. The fact that this conflation was largely illusory and that an assertive strategy could actually lead to far-reaching concessions from the state, securing greater

autonomy for the labour movement, was a proposition that was not tested until 1973. By the time it became clear that this was the case, CELU's moderate leadership was doomed.

Trade unionism had been legalised in Ethiopia in a conjuncture where labour unrest was becoming increasingly frequent. The imperial government assumed that open trade unionism under a moderate leadership and within a restrictive legal-institutional nexus could provide more efficient internal control mechanisms than external control and repression alone. The general success of this approach can be illustrated with a citation from a bakery union leader that appeared in CELU's *Voice of Labour* (1970: 11):

> *Your union has tied our hands and feet. Before you organised us we used to get substantial concessions from employers by merely threatening a walkout. The employers knew that we did not kid when we threatened – the work, the flour even the equipment was not safe. Yet, now you have advised us that through the union we have first to discuss with our employers, then if we are not satisfied we have to submit our grievance to the labour relations section of the MNCD and that if we are not reconciled by the section we have to lodge our dispute with the LRB. The case does not stop there, either employers or employees can appeal to the Supreme Imperial Court [or even referred] to His Majesty's [court]. Yes, your union has weakened our unity. We neither have the money, the time nor the manpower to follow up our disputes through these channels. Your union has only tied us to the benefit of our employers.*

The above does not detract from the achievements of CELU and affiliated unions – some of which were quite substantial – but rather illustrate the dual role of trade unionism. Moreover, it also does not mean that the state lacked effective instruments of direct control and repression in cases where events were to its disliking. Individual unions considered to be engaged in 'unfair practices' – for example, by calling a strike – could be forcefully dissolved by the LRB. This was the fate, for example, of the union of Lazaridis Cotton Mills in 1963. Invoking the wrath of the LRB, moreover, could have other deleterious effects, 'since any declaration of illegality' – the likely outcome of any strike call – would 'entitle management to dismiss all the strikers' (Morehous 1969: 65).

On the level of the confederation, the state would intervene to shore up CELU's leadership whenever the latter was threatened, but also to impress on the latter the importance of remaining within approved parameters. Where the leadership could or would not guarantee an outcome consistent with official expectations placed on it, the state did not shy away from employing repression to generate such outcomes. The state was repeatedly to display a catalogue of measures ranging from harassment, arrests, violence, to occasional lethal force. Only later, when

contestation took place over increasingly high stakes, was it to engage in determined mass repression. When it did so, as has been demonstrated, it eventually resulted in the subjugation of the labour movement and the termination of its autonomy. But the aftermath of the Ethiopian revolution constituted a unique conjuncture, and to extrapolate from this that the state would always have been capable of employing such massive terroristic violence is unfeasible. Despite the constant preoccupation with imposing state control, the exposition above demonstrates that there were many times assertive strategies and militant practices managed to achieve important advances without triggering such measures. It also demonstrates that open state interference often triggered an adversary reaction among the workers and in fact fed into growing militancy and radicalisation. State repression, then, was an important factor in containing militancy at certain conjunctures, but for the longer part of the first cycle it was neither as reliable, cost efficient, nor effective as the internal control entrusted onto the labour bureaucracy.

Through most of the 1960s and early 1970s, international support effectively reinforced the top leadership's deferential pragmatism. The international 'free' trade union movement, spearheaded in Ethiopia by the ICFTU, shouldered this task with the greatest commitment. Through the leverage that came with its financial assistance it would exert a level of influence over CELU's leadership that is incompatible with any meaningful autonomy of the latter. In fact, the dependence was so great that it was considered excessive, and a source of discomfort to both ICFTU and CELU top officials. Nevertheless, it was wielded authoritatively by the former when the latter was considered in disagreement with the principles of 'free' trade unionism – however innocent and symbolic these transgressions were understood to be[148]. But the vassal-like relationship would also

[148] Nevertheless, the service that CELU's leadership provided to the cause of anti-radical trade unionism was greatly appreciated by its international allies. The gratitude was demonstrated by the largesse the ICFTU and allies bestowed upon the CELU officials after their downfall. Intervention at the highest political level was undertaken in order to attempt to secure their release. After that been secured, there were few limits on the material and logistical assistance provided to the former top officials. Files in ICFTU's archive shows how key officials were extended funding and logistical assistance to take up residence or pursue studies abroad. Well-paid employment was also offered all key office holder by the ICFTU, the AALC, Organisation of African Trade Union Unity and ILO, and generous assistance was extended to family members. In one case, after having seen through that a family member was offered an internship at ILO, a former top official wrote to the general secretary of the ICFTU, informing the latter that 'in the event that [she is not employed by OATUU as its secretary general had promised him], I shall be counting on your support to help my wife secure another training programme or job' (Fissehatsion 1978). In the former president's case, assistance included, among other things, relief assistance funds through his imprisonment and in the immediate aftermath, the offer of a well-paid job for the ILO at his release, and 45 000 USD that funded relocation and studies in the US of two family members (Beyene 1990). This support to his person and family, 'will definitely remain a land-mark in the history of the trade-union movement in Ethiopia', Beyene (1990) wrote his sponsors, signing of with

be seized upon internally to prop up the CELU leadership and to effect moderation among constituent unions. One way of doing so was through the ubiquitous ICFTU-funded training programmes that inculcated the principles of business unionism among workers' representatives. But as these attempts to internalise the values of 'free' trade unionism proved neither sufficient nor entirely effective, more direct mechanisms were deployed. The selective disbursement of supplied funds was a key tool by which CELU's leadership exercised influence over the orientation of constituent unions, and could force the latter to fall in line. Diversion from the acceptable line resulted in the drying up of funds. The leverage exercised in this manner was underlined by the precarious finances of the movement. Where this was not sufficient, it has been demonstrated how international allies colluded with the CELU leadership to subvert and overturn democratic decisions and processes. Finally, it has been documented how both the CELU leadership and ICFTU representatives regularly informed state offices on the activities of suspected radicals or allies alike. CELU leaders and international 'free' trade union representatives did not only collude with the state, but in the final instance they relied on its repressive capacity to ensure control over the movement. In total, the intervention of the international 'free' trade union movement reinforced efforts to keep CELU on a pragmatic footing. But in doing so, it also further constricted its autonomy.

In terms of contextual factors, the poor strategic position of Ethiopian labour has been considered an important contributing factor to Ethiopian labour's perceived subordination to the state. Killion (1985) has argued that the almost unlimited vastness of the unemployed reserve army of labour and the menial nature of most wage labour combined to create an environment where workers were particularly susceptible to the threat of dismissal. 'Dismissal is a particularly horrifying threat given the lack of employment opportunities and the vast number of unemployed workers', Morehous (1969:69) noted, lending support to the above: 'many jobs in Ethiopia remain relatively unskilled and replacement appears to be quite easy, thus affording most employers the luxury of dismissals at will'. The weak strategic position this generated, it was argued, was further undermined by two factors. First, Killion argued, 'the semi-feudal structures of agrarian surplus expropriation remained the ultimate foundations of the political and material power of the

'Long Live the ICFTU, Long Live the AALC, Long Live the AFL-CIO'. The generosity with which the CELU officials were treated contrasts sharply with the silence by which the repression of the radical labour movement was met, and the complete indifference that the international 'free' trade union movement displayed towards several batches of subsequently imprisoned and exiled Ethiopian labour leaders.

autocratic state'. Secondly, the 'master-servant' relations that were predominant in agrarian Ethiopia were 'imported' by the first-generation wage workers to their new workplaces (Killion 1985: 452-453). Combined, these three factors were argued to have resulted in Ethiopian workers' subordination to and dependence on the state.

Contextual factors certainly cannot be ignored. However, since the factors mentioned here prevailed before, during, and after the cycle described above, they cannot decisively explain the shifting orientation and fortune of the labour movement. Moreover, the reliance of the pre-revolutionary Ethiopian dominant classes and state on agrarian surplus extraction is an important observation with extensive implications, to be sure. But there is no reason to assume that this reliance on surpluses generated outside of the waged sector would weaken the strategic position of labour within the waged sector. It could very well be argued that the relative lesser importance of surpluses from the waged sector was a factor that generated a certain space for wage workers to advance their position. Indeed, Killion (1985:391) has also – somewhat contradicting the prior argument of his – argued that 'because the hegemony of the imperial ruling class rested on their control over land and peasants, rather than the capitalist sector, the state was not particularly threatened by the organisation of workers in industries, which were largely foreign-owned'. If this is the case, the revolution, which abolished the fundamental surplus extractive mechanism in the agrarian sector – landlordism – and lessened the degree of those surpluses, would ironically have had the effect of enhancing the relative importance of surplus generation in the waged sectors and thus increased the 'threat' of organised wage workers. Indeed, the repressive control regime established by the PMAC over wage labour was altogether new in scope. While it may then be argued that the general political-economic territory in which the Ethiopian labour movement prevailed was quite inhospitable to autonomous and assertive labour movementism, the factors mentioned cannot be considered determinant to the subordination of labour to the state. Eventually none of them checked the emergence of a radical and militant autonomous labour movement. Only repression finally did.

Another contextual factor that has been viewed as having left an imprint on the Ethiopian labour movement is that of social fractures. While this aspect should not be exaggerated, the issue of the national division of the workforce has been raised in a number of texts. In the aftermath of the 1974 general strike, for example, a survey conducted by Seleshi (1976) found that views about the

general strike somewhat tended to differ among different groups of workers. While 'blue-collar' workers and workers from 'non-dominant' nationalities tended to view the benefits of the general strike in more economic terms, 'white-collar' workers and workers from 'dominant' nationalities emphasised the political gains (Seleshi 1976). This is a theme that Clapham (1990: 55) has also raised, claiming that blue-collar workers of the Akaki and Kaliti industrial district who were 'more likely to be Oromo than Eritrean' provided important armed support for the PMAC. He also claimed there was significant support for the PMAC among workers at Wonji 'who were largely from Kambata and Welayta', contrasting this with 'more-skilled northerners who tended to oppose it'. Although Clapham's claims are less substantiated than Seleshi's, they somewhat reinforce the latter. It is plausible that national or regional origin had some level of tendency to correlate with orientation, at least within certain conjunctures. There are also indications that national fractures affected the coherence of the labour movement to some degree. According to Kiflu (2014, personal interview) for example, some of the resentment towards Alem Abdi stemmed from his Gurage origin, and some dissenters took issue with the Eritrean origin of several of the CELU leaders. Killion (1985), meanwhile, accounts for how the regionalist sentiments between Gojami and non-Gojami workers fuelled conflicts within the union of the Bahir Dar Textile Factory. Seleshi (197: 689) describes how oppositional labour activists accused the CELU leadership of ethnic and regional discrimination, and there are several reports in the CETU archives of conflicts in constituent unions entailing a national/ethnic aspect[149]. However, as there is overwhelming evidence of multinational participation across both the radical and moderate wings of the labour movement, the importance of this factor should not be overstated. While Tigrigna-speaking northerners, for example, provided the core of CELU's top officialdom, they also played an important role in the radical opposition. Something similar can likely be said of all those nationalities that constituted a significant share of the wage labouring population. If national fractions were an aspect that conditioned orientation, it was a contingent and minor one.

As indicated in Clapham's claim above, much of the literature refers to the impact of another fracture: that of the differences in orientational tendencies between better paid and educated white-collar workers, and blue-collar workers, with, perhaps unexpectedly, the former exhibiting a

[149] See, for example, Emmanuel Fayessa Negassa and Tedla Fantaye's (1971) report on the Papasinos Fibre Factory union for one such account.

greater tendency towards assertiveness, radicalism, and militancy[150]. Some accounts have ventured as far as claiming that the militant labour opposition movement was more or less reducible to a white-collar phenomenon – an unsustainable position in light of the exposition presented above. Much like the issue of national/ethnic origins, these differences should neither be generalised nor exaggerated, but neither can they be completely ignored. Unions in which skilled and educated workers played a dominant role provided the militant opposition movement with some of its firmest bases of support and many of its prominent leaders. Explanations proposed include the degree to which white-collar workers occupied a better strategic economic position, less vulnerable to dismissal because of the scarcity of skilled labour, and thus less dependent on employers or the intervention from CELU's national centre in case of conflict with the latter (Killion 1985). It has also been argued that education imbued skilled workers with universalist perspectives and lessened the relative importance of 'practical bread and butter issues' (Alemu, 2014 personal interview). Another explanation suggests that time in higher educational institutions exposed white-collar workers to the radical agenda of the student movement (Killion 493-494). However, only a small share of skilled workers had attended higher education, and none of the labour leaders was known for past student movement activism. Material interests driving white-collar radicalism have also been proposed. According to this view, white collar-workers were thought to generally have been more directly negatively affected by the nationalisations of the PMAC and had thus came to resent the latter (Alemu, 2014 personal interview). However, since the radical labour opposition strongly supported the agenda of nationalisations, demanding that they be intensified rather than relaxed, this is a quite implausible explanation (CELU 1975a).

On a related note, however, it is possible that redistributive PMAC policies such as rent controls, agrarian reform and wage freeze in the upper echelons had a greater effect and influence on certain categories of workers. For example, workers from non-dominant nationalities were more likely to have relatives benefitting from the land reform as its impact was the greatest in the southern regions

[150] A variant is Andergachew's (2000: 342) geographical breakdown of support among workers for EPRP and MEISON in the early post-revolutionary years – which, considering the fact that the latter was at the time working with the PMAC, can be taken as proxies of support for the radical oppositional strand of the labour movement vis-à-vis that of the state-aligned. While the former reportedly had more support among workers in Addis Ababa and the large cities, the latter had more support from workers in the areas surrounding Addis Ababa and among rural workers. Somewhat corresponding to both the social and geographical breakdowns discussed, Killion (1985: 501-502) contends that by 1973 'white-collar unions' in and around Addis Ababa had come to lead the radical labour opposition. This ignores the fact that a majority – 18 to be precise – of the 30 disaffiliated unions were from outside of the greater Addis Ababa area.

where tenancy was more widespread, while blue-collar workers were more likely to benefit from price and rent controls. Better employment security, instituted in the aftermath of the revolution, could also have been a factor. White-collar workers, on the other hand, would have been more likely to be negatively affected by the wage freeze. Whatever the exact reasons, the proposition that white-collar workers were slightly overrepresented within the radical opposition seems plausible, even if the dichotomy it implies is somewhat artificial and the strength of this tendency has been exaggerated. Masses of blue-collar workers and white-collar workers from across the national spectrum participated in both the militant labour opposition movement and in the less militant structures and strands of the movement. 'The social origin of the opposition [was] no different from the other sectors of the working class' Kiflu (2014, personal interview) has stated. A quick glance at the roster of PWC members and supporting union leaders, as well as AETU leaders, would corroborate this view, giving few hints of relative over- and under-representation along these lines. The effect of social and professional fractures within the wage working population on the coherence and orientation of the labour movement, while plausibly existent, was subordinate to other factors.

4.8 Conducive factors

Radicalism and the coming of the high tide of militancy during this first cycle of assertiveness of the Ethiopian labour movement has often been explained in terms of external dynamics. References to the influence of external parties have been quite common. Depending on the different views on the legitimacy of such influence, this has interchangeably been referred to as infiltration, influence, or vanguardism. Since labour radicalism and militancy peaked during the conjuncture that also produced the Ethiopian revolution, it has unfortunately and erroneously come to be subsumed under the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution. It is only in this context the idea of 'infiltration' has any coherence, as it is only in this context an infiltrating agent can be identified: Marxist-Leninist groups that emerged within the same conjuncture in general, and the EPRP in particular. However, the exposition has demonstrated how labour radicalism and militancy far preceded the revolution, and hence the implausibility of subsuming the former under the latter. The idea of infiltration suffers from the same problem, but since a comprehensive evaluation is probably warranted, this requires somewhat of a detour.

In mid-1974, two staff members were recruited to CELU's headquarters: Kiflu Tadesse and Seyoum Kebede. Both were members of the EPRP[151] – the former a member of the politburo – although they were not known as such to the CELU leadership nor the authorities. Girmachew Lemma, a former student leader who would join the same party that autumn, was already employed as CELU's legal advisor at that time. Kiflu and Girmachew, together with veteran CELU staff and labour opposition member Tedla Fantaye, formed a miniscule workers' committee of EPRP (Kiflu 2014, personal interview). By mid-1974, however, the EPRP was a very small organisation, and its structures were in a rudimentary state. It was not in a position to exercise direct influence over or within CELU. Priority was given to finding legal and occupational cover for its members and its returnees from abroad – such as Kiflu[152] – in order not to draw the attention of the authorities. As EPRP-member Samuel Alemayehu was a former CELU board member, he personally recommended the two EPRP members for employment.

The development of EPRP influence within the labour movement did not occur until at a later stage. Initially, none of the prominent labour leaders – including Marqos Hagos – were EPRP members, nor were they exhibiting any traits that would distinguish them as partisan to any political faction. Alemu Abebe (2014, personal interview) and Kiflu Tadesse (2014, personal communication) have independently noted that the radical leadership was constituted by genuine labour activists and representative of the workers, rather than infiltrating agents. The fact that its leaders in the main were seasoned labour activists is also evident in CELU's documentation. The demands that attracted the rank-and-file to the labour opposition related to the conditions of labour rather than questions of state power, Alemu (2014, personal interview) has argued. Nevertheless, he assessed that in ripe conditions these demands were instrumentalised by the EPRP in order to penetrate the movement and gain influence over its leadership. It is an established fact that several key leaders came to join the party and/or its labour front, and whatever the reasons, once both movements found themselves targets of state repression a certain unity of purpose was indeed established. At this stage, according to Kiflu (2014, personal communication), it was the organisational resources that the EPRP members could offer, particularly in establishing and operating clandestine networks, that constituted the key aspect of this relationship. Politically, he

[151] Which was not to declare its existence for another year.
[152] Kiflu had returned from Soviet Union, where he had studied journalism, and was employed as editor for *Voice of Labour* on his return.

has claimed, there were no reasons for the EPRP's activists to interfere, as the confrontation between labour and the PMAC was generating radicalisation and a drift towards the party's position in any case. It is noteworthy that while the PWC declarations of the summer of 1975 indeed reflected a convergence of views between CELU and EPRP on many issues, they stopped short of embracing EPRP's central demand: the establishment of a provisional peoples' government. CELU thus retained, to its end, that level of autonomy it had acquired through over a decade of contestation. This having been stated, it is clear that EPRP had gained a certain traction within CELU in its final months. This is illustrated by the fact that several additional EPRP members were eventually recruited as CELU employees[153]. As parts of the labour movement were driven underground beginning in 1975, moreover, the members of EPRP's workers' committee became instrumental in organising the clandestine structures of the movement. This is how Kiflu explains the origins of the clandestine structures (2014, personal interview) [abridged]:

> *Underground meetings of around 15, 20, 35 [labour leaders] started taking place around this time. I and Girmachew took part and it was here that the groundwork for labour resistance was being given a leadership. And it was here that we [developed] a very neat structure. This is primarily the work of us – the EPRP. What we did was, we formed [zonal] committees. Those that attended [the central meetings] represented their [zones], and in the [zones], various unions took part, so that decisions that we passed down would reach the [zones] and the [zones] would take it to their unions. It was an effective mechanism. The [PMAC] was not aware of this activity. Alem Abdi was not aware of this activity. They thought everything was quiet [and] they had told [the workers] not to hold meetings. The involvement of EPRP in that struggle was determinant – it gave them direction. They had their issues, but what we gave them [was] the organisational format, how to best get organised. In Eritrea too, they formed a committee of 13 people. The way the one in Addis was formed. I think that Dire Dawa had its committee, the three committees were coordinating amongst each other [and] Alem Abdi was just sitting by himself, totally isolated.*

It was these underground structures of labour activists, networked with the assistance of a few EPRP cadre and containing a small but growing number of sympathisers, that coordinated the

[153] They included EPRP militant Mezgebnesh Abayu, editor of the party-aligned *Goh* journal. Her story was retold in former EPRP militant Mohamed Yimam's (2013) book *Wore Negari,* where Mohamed also described how he and another EPRP member was recruited to CELU to hold classes at HVA Wonji Shoa on socialism. Mezgebnesh's personnel file in the CETU archives indicates that her date of employment with CELU was September 1, 1975, and she remained a CELU employee to March 1976 the least. She was, in order, the fifth EPRP militant to have been employed by CELU's headquarters, following Samuel Alemayehu (who had left CELU by this time), Girmachew Lemma, Seyoum Kebede and Kiflu Tadesse. This was in addition to the many members recruited from among the rank-and-file workers and representatives, and a few EPRP militants like Mohamed Yimam who were engaged for short-term tasks.

resistance against Alem Abdi, against the closure of CELU's offices in May 1975, and, after the dissolution of CELU, that morphed into ELAMA. In this manner, the EPRPs input was important, but its influence was only attendant, for without the already grinding dynamics of radicalisation and growing militancy, its intervention would neither have been effective nor, perhaps, even welcome in the first place. In the most successful cases – such as with the coordination of basic unions for the 1976 campaign to have arrested leaders released – clandestine party-organised structures and activists could help in restructuring, revitalising and coordinating the labour movement, but not necessarily create militant energies where none existed in the first place. Underlining this interpretation of the direction of causality, Kiflu (2014, personal interview) has noted that the radicalised labour movement on a number of occasions in fact went further in militancy than the members of EPRP's workers' committee found prudent or tactically advisable. This includes the vote to call a general strike in September 1975, which members of the EPRP committee reportedly were ‘totally against’.

The exposition above indicates that there is evidence of only limited external influence – whether cast as infiltration or vanguardism – in generating militancy within the movement. Labour militancy and radicalism generally developed outside of, for most of the cycle in the complete absence of, and occasionally even against the influence of agents of political movements operating within the labour movement. The militant labour opposition movement, moreover, was led by experienced workers' representatives, rather than infiltrating external agents. The fact that some of them were later recruited to political parties does not alter this fact. But most importantly, militancy, radicalism, wildcat action, rank-and-file pressure, and the emergence of a full-fledged oppositional movement within the labour movement are all phenomena that predated the establishment of political parties in Ethiopia altogether, never mind the EPRP's workers' committee. To assign a prominent role for the latter in the radicalisation of the former is therefore to be guilty of placing the cart before the horse. To say that a party, students, or any other entity was responsible for the long arch of growing militancy and radicalisation of the labour movement is to confuse causes and effects.

If not the effect of external agencies, then, what were the factors that kindled the emergence of a radically assertive and militant Ethiopian labour movement in this cycle? It can be emphatically stated that militancy and radicalism was fuelled by pressures from below. There are many ways to

substantiate this. Workers were recorded to have found, by themselves, huge injustices in their relations with employers. Morehous (1969: 70-71) contemporaneous research on workers' attitudes found that ‘unwillingness to give a wage increase is viewed only as an attempt by the employer to squeeze more of an already *outrageous* [emphasis added] profit from the workers' toil’.

Another way in which militant pressure from below came to express itself was in recurrent wildcat action. In fact, as has been demonstrated in the above, it was largely due to the desire to control such wildcat action that trade unionism was legalised in Ethiopia in the first place. In the long decade that followed, CELU President Beyene has affirmed that pressures from below often forced the hand of the local leadership and led to strikes whether the union officials wanted it or not (Beyene 2010: 109). Morehous found that rank-and-file pressures caused an inclination of union leaders to frequently call strikes during negotiations. Union leaders, he claimed, accepted this as a concession to the ‘the militancy of the mass of union members’ (Morehous 1969: 71). ‘CELU has always been a restraining force, because usually the workers would want to use force’, former CELU top official Fissehatsion Tekie (1983, interview with Tom Killion) has stated, corroborating this view.

A final, most definite, expression of the radicalising effects of the militant pressures from below was the emergence of the oppositional movement, the protracted campaign it pursued against the deferential policies of the CELU leadership, and its eventual toppling of that leadership, placing the movement on an offensive footing. In the words of CELU staffer Emmanuel Fayessa (1977: 97), writing about the radicalisation of CELU's demands in 1974, they were ‘apparently due to the pressure from the breakaway unions and also the growing militancy among the rank-and-file members of the organisation itself’. Whichever level looked at then, and through the full cycle, it can be asserted and substantiated that rank-and-file pressures from below was the main determinant and propelling force of assertive labour movementism during this cycle.

The emergence of a layer of labour bureaucracy, while helpful in checking militant impulses from below, was itself an additional factor fostering resentment and generating pressure. The deferential orientation of this bureaucracy reinforced this tendency. Morehous (1969: 72-74) has described how the leadership drew ‘a great deal of criticism from union leaders and employees’, and how its

role 'as an intermediary earned it some of its most bitter criticism'[154]. This included allegations of 'giving in and siding with the employer too soon'. According to Syoum (2005: 60), union leaders faced constant risks of being identified as 'pro-management'. Typically, Morehous found, union officials were 'distrusted by a substantial number of union members'. Frequently, this distrust originated in the perception that union officials were 'too friendly with the management'. This is how Morehous (1969: 72) describes the dynamic:

> *Whenever a leaders opposes the demands of the majority, even when on some reasonable ground, the workers accuse him of selling out to the company. After seeing the previous leaders removed from office for this reason, one union leader refused to compromise an outrageous wage demand with which he disagreed, but rather waited for the Labour Relations Board to rule against the union, thus preserving his image in the eyes of the members.*

These findings not only reinforce the conclusion that radical energies and pressures emanated from the rank-and-file, but further demonstrate the convergence of interests between the labour bureaucracy and the state. Collusion, according to Morehous (1969: 75), had 'earned some of the CELU officials the name of government agents'. For while rank-and-file energies were sometimes skilfully displaced through a number of bureaucratic means, it appears that collusion with employers and the state, blatant state interference, subversion of democratic decisions, punitive and wilful allocation of resources, and unaccountability of top officials reinforced militant energies as often as thwarting them. The biases of state institutions and their repressive practices also served to increase frustration, militancy and radicalism. The denial of basic rights – to organise, to hold a general congress, to assemble and strike, and to elect representative officials – were points of the most vociferous opposition from the oppositional labour movement. In this manner, the high-handedness of the state counter-intentionally provided fuel for further radical drift. Kiflu (2014, personal interview) has interpreted this dynamic in the following way:

> *It was a natural process. Because they had been deprived the right to have an independent labour union. These were labour unionists. They were deprived their union rights. They were struggling for their union rights. It was that process that radicalised that section of the working class… It was the government that forced them to be radicals. Had the government considered, had the government allowed*

[154] Killion (1985: 486-487) too has stated that 'the very connections between CELU leaders, capital and the state created distrust of the national leaders on the part of rank-and-file workers'. Rather than lessened, he claimed, this was only reinforced by reliance on international financial aid.

> *them to have a union, a confederation that could cater to the needs of workers, I don't think that radical process would [have taken place].*

While this interpretation has some appeal, it overstates the importance of state repression under the PMAC as it ignores the longer arch of growing militancy and radicalisation. Although it is plausible that government high-handedness constituted a reinforcing factor, there would have been no basis for the state to intervene had not the militant pressures prevailed in the first place.

A final and intriguing aspect of militancy, radicalisation and assertiveness during this first cycle is the degree to which it appears to display attributes of a whole other dynamic. This dynamic, probably at least as important as the ones mentioned but hitherto neglected in the literature, can be proposed as a factor driving much of the cyclical growth in militancy and assertiveness discussed in this chapter: the process appears to exhibit traits of path dependence in the manner which assertiveness and readily identifiable achievements – in terms of outcomes of militant practices – play into and fuel one another. In the course of the late 1950s, the 1960s, and the early 1970s, a string of major achievements were recorded as outcomes of workers' struggles. This began with the establishment of the first workers' associations and the undertaking of the first successful strikes; proceeded with the legal recognition of trade unionism and the establishment of a confederation; a progressive shift in workplace balance of forces and the emergence of collective bargaining; and the emergence of the labour movement as a national social-political force capable of extracting heavy concessions from capital and the state, that finally generated the all-out showdown with the latter. Through each step of this development, achievements only seem to have further reenergised the movement and ratcheted up its force and demands. The best and most direct example is probably the manner in which, first, the successful bank strike of 1973 demonstrated the feasibility of militancy and released energies that resulted in the 1974 general strike, and, second, how the successful general strike triggered a strike wave through the spring, and generated a proletarian insurgency that lasted through the following couple of years despite severe repression. But there are plenty more examples, and this dynamic is identifiable on many levels. This factor – for which the term *inspirational/demonstrative factor* is proposed – will repeatedly be returned to and examined in the chapters that follows.

5. Organisation, movement and orientation: second cycle

In this chapter, a second cycle of contested advance and retreat of the Ethiopian labour movement is discussed. A caveat is warranted at the outset: this cycle was not marked by a level of force and assertiveness commensurate with the first. Neither was the depth – the degree to which the process reached into and animated the structures of the movement – comparable to the first; nor was the duration of the cycle as protracted. Nevertheless, beginning in the waning days of the PDRE, stirrings within the labour movement were emerging again. These stirrings grew into a number of strikes and protests; a process of renewed networking and rebuilding among labour activists; and the emergence of a new confederation jealously guarding its autonomy and challenging state encroachment. However, before long the process was checked and reversed, and it consequently failed to generate the sort of dynamism and resilience that the labour movement showcased in the 1960s and 1970s. Nevertheless, this second cyclical appearance of a relative autonomous and assertive labour movement remains an important episode capable of shedding light on the general pattern of dynamics and forces that shape it. Moreover, if the second cycle contrasts with the first in that the state's strategy of containment and subjugation in the second case was more successful, examining the reasons why this was the case may go some way towards explaining the dynamics and determinants of the orientation too.

Since the secondary literature on the Ethiopian labour movement beyond the 1970s is even scarcer than that which covers the period of the first cycle, the discussion contained in this chapter almost exclusively relies on primary sources. Archival and documental resources have been drawn on, and a number of interviews with former leading trade unionists have been essential in reconstructing the process.

5.1 Renewed stirrings, renewed pressures

As discussed in the previous chapter, the pacification and subjugation of the labour movement had been achieved by the late 1970s. Unions and workplace discussion forums, reinforced by party committees and armed squads, safeguarded industrial peace and discipline, disseminated government policy, and intercepted early signs of discontent and opposition quite effectively through the 1980s. Through most of the remaining long decade of PMAC/WPE rule, the labour movement remained docile. Industrial tranquillity was only punctuated by localised minor outbreaks of discontent, occasional state harassment, and new purges of labour representatives not

deemed sufficiently reliable. In 1990, for example, it was reported that 'several trade union leaders' had been arrested, including the secretary general of the Construction Workers' Union, the ETU secretary for Kaffa Region, and the central ETU secretary Alemayehu Tadesse (Sunmonu 1990). A notable exception to industrial tranquillity – in terms of strikes – took place at the Asmara/Barottolo Textile Factory in 1983. Here, workers refused to work extended extra hours without compensation – a common requirement – and when, as a result, wage penalties were imposed, they called a strike. The strike was met with a reaction that would strongly discourage any other union contemplating a similar course of action. First, the factory was surrounded by armed troops and 65 workers were arrested (Goitom 1985). The committee tasked with investigating the incident then declared the strike illegal, and warned that any such industrial action was 'anarchist' and 'anti-revolutionary' – two foreboding labels in the aftermath of the high terror of the 1970s. In addition to administrative punishment meted out against the workers, the ruling authorised the government to take 'legal "measures"' [155] [N.B. citation marks from the original text of the ruling] against strike leaders, who were accused of being followers of 'secessionists', and warned that in the future 'measures' would be taken 'without hesitation' in similar cases (Committee of the High Authority in the Region of Eritrea 1983). No reoccurrence of large scale industrial action was to take place in the years that followed, until when, at the end of the 1980s, the WPE's authority had begun to seriously erode.

In the absence of any viable conduits or means of exerting pressure and affecting change, what progress that was recorded consisted of organisational expansion – both in terms of the size of the membership and the labour bureaucracy. Because membership in the AETU and the ETU was mandatory for production workers, the number of workers in affiliated unions grew from around 200 000 in 1977 to over 300 000 members in the 1980s[156] (Desta 1988: 140-142). The number of employees of the central confederation had meanwhile reached 644, and they were joined by basic trade union staff and officials (CETU 1994a). At the Akaki Textile Factory alone, for example, the ETU bureaucracy consisted of eleven FTOs with full wages paid by the company (Sikazwe 1993a).

[155] What these 'measures' consisted of can only be speculated on. It is noteworthy, however, that 'measures' during WPE rule was the standard euphemism for execution. The reservation that the measures would be legal is not very reassuring, since the emergency law operational in Eritrea at the time, and referred to in the ruling, permitted the employment of lethal force.

[156] For Andargachew (2000: 340), who cites a slightly higher number of unionised workers in 1977, this expansion alone constituted a 'great victory of the Ethiopian workers', and that was indeed how it was officially presented.

Instead of the old three-story headquarters built with funding from the AALC in the 1970s, ETU had moved into an eleven-story building constructed with assistance from the German Democratic Republic. But it was not only the professional staff that had expanded. The representative layer had also grown exponentially. In 1982, no less than 26 133 workers had been elected to leading bodies of unions – almost exactly a tenth of the membership – and reportedly been released from tasks in production (Beyene 2012: 245-246).

Although open industrial conflict was rare, a few episodes of unrest occurred during the final years of WPE rule. When and where the opportunity arrived, workers displayed their resentment against the structures imposed upon them. In the autumn of 1989, some 400 workers whom had been transferred from the Akaki Textile Factory[157] to the Adey Abeba factory without prior consultation, walked off the factory and brought their grievances to MoLSA. The lenient and careful manner in which they were handled by authorities and ETU officials indicated the beginning of a shift in the balance of forces (ETU 1989). During the spring of 1991, when the rapid erosion of the WPE's authority, repressive capacity, and its always shallow legitimacy was becoming apparent, signs of renewed labour combativeness multiplied. Workers in the industrial district of Akaki repeatedly protested against their working conditions and the despised labour bureaucracy. On several occasions, over a period of several months, workers from the Akaki Textile Factory demonstrated outside, attacked and stoned the 'luxurious' villa of ETU President Tadesse Tamrat[158] (Geresu 2017, personal communication). Among workers and residents of the area, stories about the mythical luxuries of the house included rumoured facilities that allowed a car to be driven into the bedroom (Geresu 2017, personal communication), and the feeling among the workers was allegedly that 'he had built the villa with their money' (Hailu 2017, personal interview). In one case they were reported to have 'dismantled' parts of the building (Hailu 2017, personal interview).

Beyene (2012: 250-254), furthermore, has described an 'uprising' taking place among workers in and around Addis Ababa in the waning years of the WPE. According to Beyene, the uprising was precipitated by the arrest of numerous workers and representatives that had protested poor pay and

[157] Previous to its nationalisation, this factory was known as the Indo-Ethiopian textile factory.
[158] Tadesse, a Central Committee member of WPE, committed suicide in May 1991, days after the fall of Addis Ababa to the EPRDF army.

intensified requisitions of ‘voluntary contributions’ to support the war effort[159]. As unrest spread through the industrial corridor leading south from the capital, it came to include workers at the Ethiopian Cargo Transport Corporation, in construction, at the Wholesale and Resale Trading Corporation, Alcohol Corporation, the Metahara and Wonji sugar factories, the Akaki Textile Factory and the Ethio-Fibre Factory. At the Akaki Textile Factory, workers' grievances included complaints over postponed annual wage revisions, the collective agreement, but also the charge that union leaders were tools of the WPE that did not represent workers, and the demand that workers be allowed to freely elect representatives. Eventually, the dispute became sufficiently serious as to trigger the intervention of a WPE delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister Fisseha Desta, who promised to address some ‘minor economic questions urgently’ in order to pacify the workers. Meanwhile, however, Beyene claims that the PDRE president Mengistu Hailemariam had clarified that he would ‘take action’ against the ETU leadership should he hear anything further about workers disobeying. In any event, the spreading ‘uprising’ was said to have continued until the fall of the WPE government in 1991. Since Beyene's account is not backed up by any sources, and no dates are given for the events, it is difficult to substantiate in detail. The documentation and recollections available on the rumblings of discontent, petitioning, protesting and repression that took place in the final years of the PDRE seems to indicate that the term ‘uprising’ is an exaggeration. Nevertheless, Beyene's account corroborates the impression that stirrings of open discontent had again began to emerge among the workers and within the labour movement.

The archive of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in Addis Ababa, moreover, contains evidence of a number of emerging disputes. In April 1991, for example, a bitter conflict erupted between the management of the fuel company Total Mer Rouge and its union. On April 3, the union, alarmed by seemingly wanton disciplinary actions taken against workers in the context of negotiations for a new collective agreement, passed a resolution threatening to go on to strike (Graf 1991a; Tadesse 1991; Kedeme 1991). In a meeting with the company's management, this was accompanied by the explicit invocation of the spectre of ‘bloodshed’ by the workers' representatives (Graf 1991a; Kedeme 1991). This triggered strong protests from the company and

[159] Contributions to the war effort did not only take the form of cash contributions. The AETU/ETU also drafted members to the wars with various insurgent movements that continued unabated throughout the period of PMAC/WPE rule. According to a sympathetic observer ‘AETU was able to arm and dispatch tens of thousands of volunteers [sic] from its ranks when Ethiopia was attacked by counter-revolutionaries and imperialist aggression’ in 1977/78 alone (Desta 1988: 140).

intervention by the ETU and authorities, forcing the union to back down from some of its bluntest threats (Graf 1991b; Total Mer Rouge Workers). But the grievances had not been addressed and the conflict was far from resolved

If these emergent signs of a re-energisation were real, they were soon nipped in the bud. With the entry of the EPRDF army into Addis Ababa in May 1991, state power was rearticulated in the shape of a victorious insurgent force, conceiving itself as representing the rural masses and marginalised nationalities, intolerant of anything that could be perceived as urban opposition, and ready to use such force that had brought it to Addis Ababa to bear on any expression of such opposition. The labour movement did not constitute an obvious source of support in this scheme of things[160], but its very size and strategic location made its control – or, at the very least, its pacification, preventing it from becoming a base of opposition – an important task. An abridged version of a leaked internal party document, stated that 'without compromising [the trade unions'] organisational independence, we should try to control them and lead them through indirect organisational links' (EPRDF 1996: 28). This turned out to describe the route that was to be followed quite presciently.

The national trade union centre – tainted as it was by its close organisational and political attachment to the WPE – of the ETU and its industrial federations were abolished with the coming to power of EPRDF. The headquarters of the ETU, moreover, was initially taken over by the EPRDF army and made a command centre of the latter (Dawey 2015, personal interview). Several of the central leaders of the movement ended up in prison, and a few fled the country. The basic unions, however, were not abolished, but would be subjected to a leadership purge and mandatory re-elections.

Initially, the incoming government had not formulated a coherent strategy in dealing with workers and the labour movement, except for purging the latter from WPE remnants and perceived oppositional holdouts. In July 1991, the new government – the TGE – began organising elections in the basic unions, in which WPE members and security personnel of the old government were banned from standing (DoS 1992: 130-131). As a result, a new crop of labour leaders emerged.

[160] While the peasantry was considered the mainstay of EPRDF support, and was indeed the social force that had brought it to power, the relationship the EPRDF claimed to enjoy with workers was more ambivalent. 'Though the aim of our Revolutionary Democracy is not to completely free the proletariat from exploitation', an internal party document was reported to read (EPRDF 1993: 23) 'it is still the only approach that best serves its interests now'.

Reflecting the lack of a broader strategy, however, a report described how the new ruling party was involved in the purge and reorganisation of basic unions, but also how, purportedly, 'in the absence of official guidelines Transitional Government officials have been tolerant of strikes and protests in the workplace' (DoS 1992: 130-131). To management, this seemed to imply that 'the TGE [was] being indulgent with labour demands' (DoS 1992: 130-131). But mass retrenchments, and arrest of labour leaders seemed to contradict this interpretation.

Alemayehu Tadesse, the ETU secretary cited in the above, for example, was released from prison when the WPE fell in May 1991, only to be re-arrested by the EPRDF government in August that same year (Sunmonu 1991). Melesse Shiferaw, a former regional chairman of ETU, faced a similar fate. Having been detained by the previous government for six months, allegedly 'for the sake of labour rights', he was forced into exile with the coming to power of the EPRDF, claiming that 'all my former colleagues are in prison' (Melesse 1991). Massive retrenchments, meanwhile, contrasted with the relative job security workers had enjoyed during the previous regime. While no conclusive total figure is available, an ILO (2005: 21) study indicates that between 1991 and 1997 over 17 500 workers of state-owned enterprises alone were retrenched or forced into early retirement. This figure does not take into consideration the effects of liberalisation and privatisations on workers in private or privatised enterprises. Moreover, the 1992 decision of the Transitional Government to radically devalue the Ethiopian Birr – from 2.07 to 5 ETB per USD in one fell swoop – in combination with the liberalisation of food prices, led to a hollowing of real wages of those that retained their jobs, which was only partially offset by the TGE's decision to raise nominal wages in the public sector[161]. But renewed attacks on the position of labour did not only come from the state. Employers too were eager to take advantage of the disorganisation of the workers and the shifting workplace balance of power this entailed.

These incursions resulted in resentment, anger, and, eventually, resistance. 'What surprised me', a young resident of the Akaki industrial area of the time recalls (Geresu 2017, personal communication), '[was that] two years after EPRDF come to power, protests erupted and actually people became nostalgic about the Mengistu time'. In August 1991, 2 500 workers of six gold mines staged an eight-day strike, demanding pay increments and improvements of conditions. Two months later the prime minister of the TGA admitted that the government had taken notice

[161] This point is examined in more detail in the following chapter.

of several strikes and workers demanding better remuneration, and in the next month-and-a-half workers of printing presses, an animal fodder factory, and the Ethiopian Freight Transport Corporation, would also strike (*EH* 1991a; 1991b; 199c; 1991d). In late 1991 and early 1992, moreover, two large strikes took place among skilled and comparatively privileged workers: at the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia[162] and at Ethiopian Airlines. The contours of a strike wave were becoming apparent, but emergent stirrings took other expressions too, and they included a wave of protests and demonstrations.

In 1993, the US Department of State reported 'numerous actions taken by former employees of state agencies who had been laid off in the process of economic restructuring or had lost their jobs in May when Eritrea gained its independence from Ethiopia' (DoS 1994). But it was not only retrenched workers that were protesting. Workers that had staged public demonstrations and protests against poor salaries and injustices in the two previous years included, among others, those of the Kaliti Food Factory, Assab and Massawa docks, Addis Ababa Fuelwood Plantation, the Addis Tool Machine Factory, the Ethiopian Building Construction Authority, the Merchandise Wholesale Trade and Import Enterprise and employees of six hospitals around Addis Ababa[163] (*EH* 1991b). The most visible protest took the form of retrenched workers of the Ethiopian Maritime Transport Authority, who erected makeshift shelters and camped on Addis Ababa's central Mesqel square while conducting a hunger strike.

Meanwhile, workers scrambled to reorganise in such a manner that would allow them to establish some form of defence against the most pressing danger – the threat of mass dismissals. This is how the situation was described by a leader of the union of the Ethiopian Domestic Distribution Corporation at the time (Hailu 2017, personal interview):

> *The government was trying to sell every enterprise. Workers were losing their job on a daily basis. Our enterprise, EDDC, was one of the high risk priorities for the government. They were openly declaring that they [were] going to retrench everybody and sell the company. That was the time that I became a trade union leader and it was a very risky time to get this responsibility. But in a few ways we started to get organised and started to talk to authorities, to talk to our managers on this issue and on how to save the families of the workers. For us, the priority*

[162] See more on this in the below.

[163] Workers of a significantly higher number of other enterprises demonstrated against management officials accused of corruption and embezzlement. But since it is difficult to decipher the degree to which these demonstrations were related to government-instigated purges of management, they have been left out from this discussion.

> *was to get job security. At that point also, the government decided — there was a push somewhere in our discussion – to lift the ban that they had put on trade unionism.*

With or without recognised unions, workers in many places erected defensive obstacles to the pressures that were mounting, but the re-recognition of the reorganised basic unions added some momentum to attempts to resist. At Total Mer Rouge, the conflict between workers and management had not yet come to a conclusion, and workers were petitioning against the management and demanding redress for the perceived injustice they had suffered (Total Mer Rouge workers 1991). Its reorganised union, which had continued to demand a resolution to its grievances – including a greater say in management decisions and a 20 percent wage increment as part of a new collective agreement – became the target of renewed harassment by the management in the summer of 1991. It was refused management recognition, and its executive committee was denied permission to meet during working hours or in the company premises (Graf 1991c). While the union instructed all workers to refuse any transfers and disciplinary actions pending discussions between management and the union, its chairman was accused of 'attempting to foment anarchy' and suspended (Debebe 1991; MoLSA 1991; Graf 1991d). He was only rehired after significant pressure from the workers – a petition signed by 100 workers threatened a strike in the absence of his rehiring (Total Mer Rouge workers 1991) – and intervention from the government, recognising the explosivity of the situation (Dawit 1991).

Bank workers, meanwhile, where at the forefront of the renewed stirrings. At the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia wages had largely been frozen since the 1970s (Andu-alem 1999). This had significantly reduced the real income of the workers. It was the union's demand to revise these wages – as well as to overturn a unilateral managerial decision to discount compensation for annual leave forfeited – that triggered a confrontation with the incoming government (Andu-alem 1999: 51-52; Etana 1991). Despite the CBE union having been reorganised and having held officially sanctioned elections, its leadership proved anything but submissive on this point. A series of meetings was held to avert the strike threat, but they came to nothing as the management, allegedly 'in consultation with the Government was stalling and was unwilling to negotiate' (EHRCO 1995: 57). With no dialogue forthcoming, a strike was called and the workers walked off the job on December 12, 1991. MoLSA termed the strike illegal, and the government announced that all strikers would be dismissed. On December 14, several union leaders, including the president of

the union, were arrested in their offices (Andu-alem 1999: 51; EHRCO 1995: 58). In light of these countermeasures, combined with promises to 'settle the grievances', workers began to return to work (Andu-alem 1999: 55). Initially, workers in provincial branches returned while Addis Ababa branches remained closed. In the capital the strike held out for a full eleven days before the High Court intervened, declaring the strike illegal and threatening both dismissal and criminal prosecution of workers who failed to report back to work immediately (Andu-alem 1999: 55-56; *EH* 1991f). While most striking workers were allowed to return, 54 were labelled instigators and were banned from doing so. They remained dismissed until 46 were rehired two years later, following negotiations between a new union leadership and the government (Andu-alem 1999: 58; EHRCO 1995: 58-59).

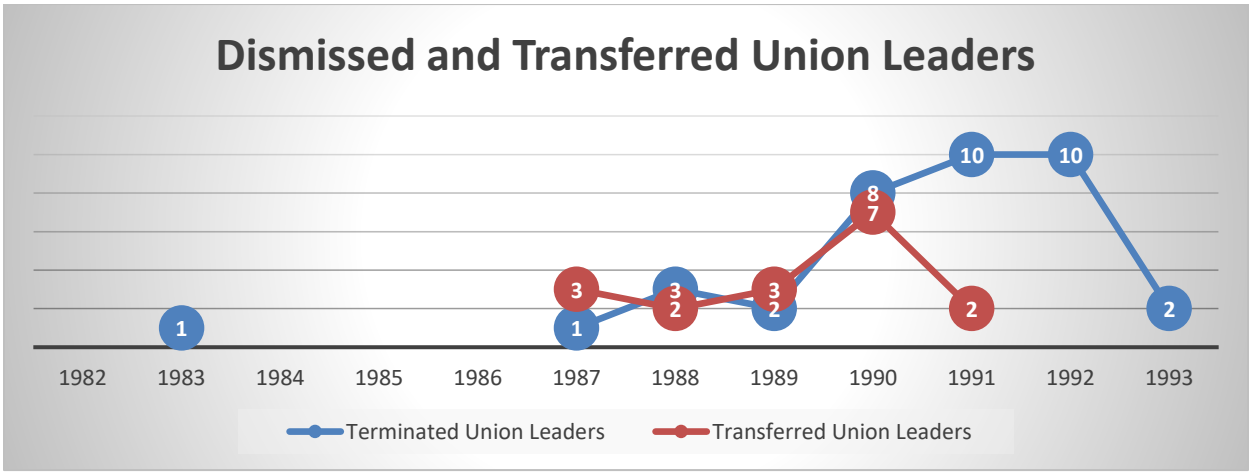
Whatever the outcome, this incidence indicates the degree to which section of the workforce had come to view its conditions as intolerable, the determination it was developing to struggle to change those conditions, and the intolerance the incoming government displayed towards the demands of labour. But as has already been indicated, it was not only bank workers that were beginning to grow restless. The years between the fall of the WPE and the re-foundation of a national trade union centre saw a large number of strikes. At the Akaki Textile Factory, the problems began with the government arresting the union leader Legesse Bajeba, and subsequently refused to recognise his election as union chairman, on the allegation that he was a participant in the state terror of the 1970s. According to more sympathetic accounts, however, Legesse had in fact been imprisoned for several years by the previous government and it was rather his outspokenness against government plans to privatise the factory and against retrenchments that drew the government's ire (Dawey 2015, personal interview). At the Ethiopian Electric Light and Power Authority (EELPA), meanwhile, the union leadership was dismissed - allegedly for attempting to organise a strike (Dawey 2015, personal interview).

5.1.1 Renewed pressures: dismissed and transferred union leaders

The 1982 Trade Union Organisation Proclamation (PMGE 1982: 113), discussed in the third chapter, entailed the provisions that 'no member of any leading body of any trade union may, without the prior approval of the minister [of labour and social affairs], be suspended from work as a result of disciplinary action' and that no such member of a leading trade union body, in the absence of the minister's explicit consent, may be 'transferred from the undertaking or urban centre

in which he works'. In line with these provisions, a filing system was set up by MoLSA containing case files on union leaders that had been dismissed or transferred by the employer. These files, labelled 'dismissed or transferred union leaders'[164] were kept open until the 1982 proclamation was repealed by the 1993 labour law, promulgated in January of that year. They contain invaluable evidence of what can only be described as a renewed crackdown on labour leaders. Ostensible reasons for termination and transfer ranges from disciplinary issues such as lateness, absence, embezzlement and corruption, to more explicit expression of discontent such as protesting and arguing, minor acts of sabotage, organising unrest and 'fomenting anarchy', and even violence against management personnel and colleagues. The chart below illustrates the number of compiled cases of terminations and transfers of union leaders over time.

Chart: Dismissed and Transferred Union Leaders 1982-1993



Source: Computation of data from the three volumes from MoLSA archives[165].

This compilation highlights a number of striking phenomena. First, it is clear, due to the sparse amount of cases dated before 1989, that a union leader possessed a considerable level of job security under the period of stable WPE rule. There was only one single case of termination of a union official in the years between 1982 and 1986. This should of course not be confused with

[164] Three volumes, labelled ማህበር መሪዎችን ከሥራ እገዳ ወይም የሥራ ዝውውር መመሪያ, were compiled before the files were closed in 1993 and are kept in MoLSA's archive. These contain the cases sent to MoLSA head office alone. Cases resolved at the workplace, or through the mediation of local MoLSA branches may thus not have reached the central level. However, as any case that could not be solved locally or regionally in amicable terms were transferred to the Ministry, it nevertheless accounts for the most significant cases, and those which actually ended in termination.
[165] The numbers indicated are that of the number of individual cases of union leaders dismissed or transferred, as mandatorily reported to MoLSA. Note that the data for the years 1982 and 1993 does not cover the full year, as the 1982 law only came into force in the month of March of that year. More importantly, the law was repealed in the very first month of 1993. The few cases reported in that year are thus the outcome of the fact that the law required reporting of such incidences for only the twenty first days of the year.

tenure security, as there were other mechanisms – internal to the trade unions, or the external directives of the WPE – to remove union leaders from offices. But it was extremely rare that union leaders were dismissed or transferred by the employer. To take such action was simply not a prerogative that employers and managers appear to have enjoyed.

Secondly, however, there is a sharp increase in the number of dismissed and transferred union leaders during the last couple of years of WPE rule. This indicates an increasing power of employers and management vis-à-vis trade unions that seems to coincide, on the one hand, with the weakening of WPE power and, on the other, its 1990 introduction of a reform agenda intended to establish a liberalised 'mixed economy'. If one looks at the official reasons given for the terminations and transfers, the overwhelming majority seem to reflect issues of workplace indiscipline and neglect. However, that cannot be taken to mean that the upturn was determined by issues of workplace discipline alone, but also reflects a shifting balance of power in the workplace, where the power of employers over labour increased as the state somewhat withdrew.

Finally, the files account for another upturn in the frequency of termination of union leaders after the seizure of power by the EPRDF. As already noted, the EPRDF instructed all unions to conduct new elections where WPE members and labour officials associated with the old regime were barred from standing. Because this most massive purge that affected *all* unions ostensibly took place within the trade unions and did not involve employers, it is not registered in the files under discussion. The renewed purge of labour leaders illustrated in the graph was thus not directly connected to the political purge of the unions, but took place *in addition* to this and originated in employer-employee relations. Again, the reasons given for termination do not refer to activities of unionism or politics, but rather workplace transgressions. As has been described with regards to the case of the Total Mer Rouge workers above[166], however, disciplinary pretexts can often cover for problematic relations with the labour movement. Certainly, this is likely to have been the case in many more instances. But the importance of this new wave of harassment of trade union leaders lies in the manner in which it reflects a major shift in the workplace balance of power: the weakening of the labour movement vis-à-vis employers and managers.

[166] While it is clear from the correspondence between the management of Total Mer Rouge and MoLSA that the union leader, Debebe Haileselassie, was fired for his unionist activities which allegedly entailed 'fomenting anarchy', a belated attempt was nevertheless made to describe the reasons for his termination as embezzlement of fuel due to faulty registration in a vehicle log book (Wolde Mikael 1991).

5.2 Re-emergence of a relatively autonomous confederation

While most basic unions had continued to operate – albeit having to elect new officials – no industrial federations nor national trade union centre existed between 1991 and 1993. Initially, it has been alleged, the TGE was planning to transfer all ETU's assets to a committee rehabilitating former soldiers (CETU 1995a). However, pressures and persuasion from, among other, ETU employees managed to sway the government (CETU 1995a). Pressure was compounded by a network committee of around twenty leaders of the most influential unions around Addis Ababa – including the CBE, the railway corporation, and Berhanena Selam printing press – demanding the return of the confederation headquarters to the workers and the reestablishment of a national centre (Dawey 2015, personal interview). Instead, a caretaker committee was established to administer ETU's assets, reorganise the unions and prepare the ground for the re-foundation of a national trade union centre (Sikazwe 1993a). Chaired by Dawit Yohannes, a senior EPRDF official, the caretaker committee consisted of a handful of former ETU employees[167], and a former official. However, the caretaker committee was restricted to operating within the confines of a limited space assigned to it by the government.

Outside of the government sanctioned process represented by the caretaker committee, basic unions and labour activists networked in impromptu constellations. An early ad-hoc network of workers' representatives is described by Hailu Ourgessa[168] (2017, personal interview) in the following terms:

> *Once we were elected and started leading the basic trade unions, we went into this clandestine fight to bring back the banned confederation. We started connecting to other trade unionists everywhere, within the city and outside the city. We started a kind of chain around the country because there was no central or national union that brought us together. We had no choice. Everybody was worrying about job security. So everybody was trying to get in touch with the other guy to know what was going on and to get together and protect the jobs. Because every day we were hearing bad news from here and from there. Workers were losing their jobs in thousands. It was an emergency kind of feeling that forced us to get in touch with other trade unionists. That's how we started the clandestine arrangement to bring back the national union… it was one-off contacts. It was not formalised, it was not in a formal kind of meeting where we sat and discussed. We were just exchanging*

[167] They included Tedla Fantaye, the veteran member of the labour opposition of the 1960s and 1970s, who had spent several years in prison due to his involvement in the movement.
[168] Hailu was the Head of the EDDC union and was to be elected the president of the Federation of Commerce, Technical and Printing Industry Trade Unions on its founding congress.

> *information on what was going on and what needed to be done. Things were moving very fast. We had no time. As soon as we started doing this we heard that the government also had started clandestine movement parallel to this. We later learned that they had reached quite an advanced level.*

Another, more formalised, constellation that emerged around this time was the Unity Association[169], which has been described as 'an activist core' and 'a rival force against the illegitimate caretaker committee' (CETU 1995b). The Unity Association established contacts with CETU employees, and set up an office in the CETU building (Hailu 2017, personal interview). The fact that the Unity Association was not restricted from doing so indicate that some form of permission – explicit or implicit – for its activities had been granted. Purportedly, the government saw an opportunity to draw in leading members into its orbit, as it eventually would (Hailu 2017, personal interview), but it is also plausible that the joint pressures these developments exercised on the government was a driving factor contributing to the TGE's decision to speed up the re-foundation of a national centre and, in early 1993, issue a new labour proclamation which provided the stipulations for it.

The international 'free' trade union movement reinvolved itself in the reorganisation of an Ethiopian national trade union centre from the outset. Expressing a quite striking continuity of aims and priorities, it was represented by the very same institutions as in the 1960s and 1970s, who brought about the reappearance of several key individuals. In 1992 Fissehatsion Tekie and Gebreselassie Gebremariam[170] returned to Addis Ababa representing the AALC, and Andrew Kailembo, who had been sent by the ICFTU to Addis Ababa in the 1970s, also returned on a mission for the organisation (Kailembo 1991). These organisations again inserted themselves right into the process of reorganising a national centre. As around 3 000 workers gathered in Addis Ababa to discuss the draft labour law for three days, AALC arranged a seminar the day after the closure of this meeting, with one hundred labour representatives invited. It was decided that this, in turn, was to be followed by an ICFTU-held two-week intensive course for 'selected participants' (Kailembo 1991). ICFTU was also made part of a committee for research and organisation set up

[169] አንድነት ማህበር, which also translates to Union.

[170] Fissehatsion was, as discussed in the previous chapter, CELU's former secretary general, and Gebreselassie was a former CELU General Council member. Both had been key members of the group of young staffers that Beyene Solomon had brought into the leadership of CELU. Fissehatsion would stay on as the AALC representative in Addis Ababa for a couple of years, and would play a role, as the exposition below describes, in the struggles over the new confederation. A third member of 'CELU's four horsemen', Mesfin Gebremichael, was dispatched as ILO's observer to the 1993 national conference of trade unionists (Sikazwe 1993a).

by the caretaker committee, which was tasked with providing a working paper on modes of trade unionism for the national conference (Sikazwe 1993a).

The Ethiopian government made itself another central player in the reorganisation of the labour movement. As early as in December 1991 the ICFTU regional representative reported having 'learnt of moves within the EPRDF government to tame the trade unions' (Sikazwe 1994c). Several sources make clear that the EPRDF government, engaged as it was in drafting a new Ethiopian constitution based on the principle of national-linguistic federalism, was pushing for a trade union confederation made up of national/regional federations rather than industrial ones[171] (Sikazwe 1993; Dawey 2015, personal interview; Hailu 2017, personal interview; Schwass 1995). The ICFTU and the US embassy, on the other hand, was arguing for a traditional structure based on industrial federations, arguing that a national/regional compartmentalisation entails a politicisation of ethnicity that 'contradict the trade union spirit' (Sikazwe 1993a). While resistance from international institutions, labour activists and workers themselves would have done much to discourage the government from imposing such a configuration, the issue was only conclusively resolved at CETU's founding congress.

Originally, the refounding congress of a national centre was scheduled to be held in March 1992 (Kailembo 1991), but just as had been the case in the 1970s, the process of reorganisation took longer than expected, in order to yield acceptable outcomes. In mid-1993, however, the caretaker committee finally called a national conference. The conference, attended by 400 representatives of the basic unions, was tasked with deciding on how the new confederation was to be structured, and with electing an organising committee that would oversee the refoundation of the national federations, prepare the ground for and oversee a general congress (Sikazwe 1993a). The committee elected consisted of 28 members and was chaired by Mekuria Gebremedhin. However, there were allegations that the selection of delegates and the election process were flawed. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO 1995: 56) argued that the committee was illegitimate.

[171] According to Hailu (2017, personal interview), the idea was based on the experience of the largest constituent party of the EPRDF – the TPLF – during its years of armed struggle. In Tigray, it had organised workers in the ማሕበር ሸቃሎ ትግራይ (Proletarian/Workers' Association of Tigray, or Trade Union of Tigray). In Tigray, which is nationally/ethnically relatively homogenous, this form of organisation faced no obvious limitation, but when transplanted to a multinational setting such as that in workplaces around Addis Ababa, things would be insurmountably more complicated. The idea was eventually dropped, but according to Hailu, the separate structures of ማሕበር ሸቃሎ ትግራይ were not absorbed by the refounded CETU.

Among other things, it was alleged that the largest unions had been excluded, and that as a result 'preorganised stooges' of the government had prevailed (CETU 1995a: 3). To some participants, it became obvious that there was an organised hand behind the selection of delegates (Hailu 2017, personal interview). This hand, according to one participant, belonged to the Unity Association, which had organised supporters in such a way to exercise control over the meeting and the elections (Dawey 2015, personal interview)[172]. Whatever the details of this were, the meeting ended overt and direct government control over the affairs of the labour movement by dissolving the caretaker committee and replacing it with an elected committee. In the months that followed, the committee drafted a constitution and oversaw the process of reorganising basic unions (CETU 1995a). But suspicion that covert and indirect external control was being exercised continued to linger. There were allegations that the reorganisation of unions was directed from above, and that the leading body continued to report to the government[173] (Hailu 2017, personal interview). Where the workers refused to be organised by an external committee conceived of as operating under government supervision and insisted on self-organisation, their unions were withheld recognition by MoLSA (EHRCO 1995: 57). This was the case for the large unions of EELPA, CBE, and Akaki textiles and garment factories, where, as described in the above, frictions and conflict between the government and workers had already developed (EHRCO 1995: 57-60). In November, however, the organising committee declared that all basic unions had been reorganised in accordance with the labour law passed earlier that year, and called a general congress (Mekuria 1993).

In November 1993, 1500 delegates of all basic unions – represented according to size – met in Addis Ababa and formed the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions. During the four-day congress, a constitution was adopted and an executive committee was elected in what observers reported to be 'a free and fair election' (Sikazwe 1993b). The confederation formed consisted of nine industrial federations, incorporating 482 basic unions with a total membership of over 200 000 workers (CETU 1995a: 7; *EH* 1993b). The idea of a confederation structured along regional/national lines was rejected by an overwhelming majority of unions (CETU 1995a).

[172] According to Dawey (2015, personal interviews), the majority of the 28 members of the Organising Committee were unaffiliated trade unionists, while he characterised 11 as 'out-right members' of the ruling party and its proletarian branch. Hailu (2017, personal interviews) corroborates the existence of such a divide by stating that 'in the organising committee [there were] quite obvious divisions on what should be done, how it should be done and on a vision towards a national trade union'.

[173] According to Hailu (2017, personal interview) the organising committee in fact continued to function 'under [advisor to the prime minister] Dawit Yohannes'.

Instead, a conventional structure of industrial federations was adopted. The founding congress was immediately followed by foundational congresses of the industrial federations, and, subsequently, a first congress of CETU's General Assembly, were office-holders were elected. The candidate for the presidency allegedly preferred by the government, Mekuria Gebremedhin, was defeated in the vote, and Dawey Ibrahim[174] of the National Industrial Federation of Tourism, Hotel and General Service Workers' Trade Unions, was elected CETU president. The faction Mekuria represented, moreover, failed to secure a majority in either the Supreme Council[175] or the Executive Committee. The defiant mood and the outcome of the congress and the assembly is vividly described by Hailu Ourgessa (2017, personal interview), who was a delegate to it [abridged]:

> *From the outset, it was a fight. It seemed as if everybody was informed through the informal structure. We had already discussed what the government was doing and everybody was angry about what the government tried – on the issue of organising the confederation on ethnic lines [and] that the government was trying to control the trade union movement. They tried all their best to control the [congress]. They failed. In every agenda that they put forward, the [representatives] was freely discussing with no fear – zero fear – saying what they wanted. …The founding constitution of CETU was laid out and every line was discussed line by line. That's where we dismantled everything that they tried to sell to us… It was surprising. I had contacted quite a few trade union leaders and we had discussed the intentions of the government and ways to fight it. But what I saw at national level at the assembly was that everybody was thinking on the same line. Everybody was aware… [The pro-government faction was] quite confused. They didn't expect this. They were running left and right; they were trying to control the situation. They couldn't.*

'From the informal discussions I had with several delegates', ICFTU's representative Sikazwe (1993b: 2) noted, 'it was obvious that the conclusions including the election results were to the satisfaction of the vast majority'. But this would not hinder the consolidation of a dissenting group, clustered around former members of the organising committee, who advocated closer adherence to government policies. Despite having been outvoted on issues pertaining to the constitution and most positions in the confederation's leading bodies, this group had followers elected as presidents of a majority of the industrial federations. Mekuria, its most prominent member, was elected

[174] Dawey Ibrahim was a former EPRP member who had left the organisation a decade earlier and been pardoned by the PMAC. He had made a civil career as an employee of the Ethiopian Red Cross, whose union he was elected leader of (Dawey 2015, personal interview).

[175] The Supreme Council was the body of 107 delegates tasked with supervising the activities of the Executive Committee.

president of the Federation of Food, Beverages and Tobacco, and Allied Trade Unions, and secretary general of CETU.

Long before the congress, it has been alleged that the ruling party had involved itself in an attempt to 'influence election results' within basic unions that were to send delegates to the congress, as well as those that determined the composition of the executive committee of CETU and the industrial federations (Praeg 2006: 186; CETU 1995a). One way of doing so was through the EPRDF's 'proletarian branch', which allegedly had set up headquarters within the Bole Printing Enterprises. Its leader was an EPRDF commander by the name of Tesfamariam Faris, and it has been alleged that Dawit Yohannes too was a member (Dawey 2015, personal interview). Trade unionists from workplaces across the country would be selected, recruited, given courses in party policy, prepared for elections to offices in the labour movement, and instructed on approved candidates to vote for (CETU 1995a). If this strategy had any success to it, it was in the elections to the leaderships of a number of basic unions and industrial federations, rather than in the majority of basic unions and at the level of the central confederation. According to the EHRCO (1995: 63), several pro-government members of the organising committee 'did not limit themselves to overseeing the formation of trade unions [but] also succeeded in having themselves elected at the grass root, federation and confederation levels'. Another means of attempting to exercise control over the labour movement was allegedly through a grouping of former EPRP members who had shifted loyalties to the new ruling party, known as Forum 84 (Praeg 2006: 184). Dawey had reportedly participated in this forum and was initially said to have had at least the tacit approval of the government (Praeg 2006). If this was ever the case, that approval was to be withdrawn shortly following his election.

For some months after the congress, a relatively autonomous national trade union centre reappeared. It was also a quite well-resourced national centre that came into existence, having been able to acquire a good deal of the ETU's assets. This included the three large and centrally located – in its old and new compounds – headquarter buildings of the latter, several vehicles, hotels, and gas stations which combined 'generated quite a bit of money for CETU' (Schwass 1996). In its discussion with the government it raised the issue of handing over confiscated property[176], and it

[176] According to CETU leaders, the EPRDF had seized 29 vehicles, 20 furnished offices, and above one million USD of funds that belonged to the labour movement (Hailu 1995; CETU 1995a).

managed to secure the return of some of the funds that belonged to the defunct ETU (CETU 1994a). The new confederation attracted growing number of workers. Within the 14 months that followed its establishment, CETU grew to incorporate 506 basic unions and 258 000 members (CETU 1995a: 7).

In terms of international affiliation, ICFTU's representative noted that the issue was not resolved by CETU's founding congress but referred to the newly elected leadership. In the following month, CETU wrote to the WFTU announcing its disaffiliation from the latter[177] and intent to 'maintain neutrality' (Dawey 1993). The ICFTU, however, was pressing for close cooperation from the outset and pledged 10 000 USD to cover immediate educational needs of the new confederation (Sikazwe 1994c). Only six months after the founding congress, neutrality ceased to be a priority, as the Supreme Council agreed to re-apply for affiliation with ICFTU (CETU 1994b). The application was expected to be approved at the ICFTU Executive Board meeting in December of that year. Relations with the AALC were described as particularly good, with the AALC purportedly extending 'unreserved assistance' to CETU (CETU 1994a: 4). However, as later events would demonstrate, the assistance was far from unconditional.

Tacit government hostility was discernible to top CETU officials from the outset of their tenure, and although it had not yet to develop to open confrontation, there was allegedly an ongoing campaign to sift out basic union leaderships – such as that of the Ethio-Djibouti Railway – which were deemed insusceptible to pressures from the pro-government faction (Hailu, 2017 personal interview). Far from superseding the factional division that had emerged before and during the election process, it became more pronounced in the aftermath. As early as May 1994 a UN agency that were renting office space in CETU's building reported that 'it became clear from commotions on the eleventh floor… that there were difficulties in a meeting of CETU', and that this had introduced 'a great sense of insecurity' among its staff (Were 1995). CETU, meanwhile, spent the months that followed re-establishing dissolved unions, conducting seminars and workshops for trade union leaders, and plan for cooperative efforts to purchase firms slated for privatisation and generate employment for retrenched workers (Svartbekk 1994). However, there was no major mobilisation, no major victories, no ground-breaking advances, nor even much success in staving

[177] The AETU had affiliated with the WFTU shortly after its establishment and its successor organisations – ETU and, for a brief moment, CETU – had remained affiliated.

off the worsening conditions for much of the wage-working force. The relatively autonomous CETU's struggles were defensive, and they were conducted in a hostile environment.

Although there had been several sources of friction between the government and CETU[178], it was the political-economic trajectory that generated antagonistic contradictions that would lead to the complete breakdown of relations. The TGE had, since coming to power, committed to a program of liberalisations that created renewed pressures on the income and job security of workers. Privatisations and efforts to improve profitability of state-owned enterprises led to massive retrenchments, which had already triggered a number of spontaneous protests from among workers**.** In 1992, TGE entered into an agreement with the IMF that saw it adopt a structural adjustment programme (SAP) supported by loans from the latter. In addition to shrinking the budget deficit, devalue the national currency, remove subsidies, liberalise prices and trade, the SAP included far-reaching privatisations, triggering legitimate fears that they would result in retrenchments. The government admitted that it was 'well aware' that it would be 'painful' and entail 'massive hardships' (CoR 1993: 51-53). In hindsight Hishe Hailu (2005) has corroborated those fears. He found that the Ethiopian case was unique in a comparative sense, as there were no safeguards against retrenchments in the process. In addition to job losses, he found that almost seventy percent of interviewed workers reported that the process had led to harassment of workers' representatives, which, in over thirty percent of the cases, included dismissal of representatives. While CETU did not oppose economic adjustment in principle, it demanded a say in the implementation of the process, and was critical towards SAPs in light of the social costs registered by the implementation of such programmes elsewhere on the continent. In the summer of 1994, these concerns prompted CETU to plan a symposium to 'come up with a concrete trade union position… as to how to deal with the social costs of SAP affecting its members' (Dawey 1994a). Before this symposium, scheduled for October that same year, could be held, however, open conflict erupted within the movement and between the movement and the government.

[178] The most serious issue was CETU's demand that the government and ruling party return requisitioned CETU property. But other issues included the refusal of the government to engage in dialogue with CETU; its insistence on minor changes in the CETU constitution – replacing the word 'nation' with 'country-wide' in order for it to adhere to the ruling party's definition of the concept of nation; and its refusal to recognise the election of an industrial federation president who was dismissed from his job in the aftermath of his election. One exception to the fraught relationship was the handover to CETU-backed cooperatives of around 40 trucks that had belonged to the dissolved public enterprise Ethiopian Freight Transport Corporation, as well as several shops (Dawey 2015, personal interview).

On August 10, having concluded that no meaningful dialogue was forthcoming but that the negative consequences of the programme were becoming acute, CETU called a press conference to lay out its position and concerns. At the press conference, CETU President Dawey Ibrahim drew up a list of problems faced by confederation, including its inability to have all its confiscated properties returned by the government, the construction of bureaucratic obstacles for its operations, neglect in addressing labour rights cases lodged with relevant authorities, and the denial of a role for the confederation in policy dialogue (CETU 1994a). But the most damning charge was levelled against the SAP-aligned policies. Dawey, speaking for the Executive Committee, stated that the programme had aggravated unemployment, eroded job security and led to 6 000 arbitrary dismissals, undermined the position of Ethiopian industry, and, through the devaluation of the Ethiopian Birr and the abolishment of subsidies, led to rampant inflation (CETU 1994a). CETU demanded a say in the planning and implementation of SAP policies, in order to alleviate their negative effects on workers, and that the government slow down the perceived 'rushed' pace by which the programme was being imposed. The statement included a call that 'the time has come for Ethiopian workers to struggle without opportunism and hesitation with the leadership of CETU', and that the duty to 'fight and fend off' the dangers incurred by the SAP – despite affecting all society – would have to fall upon the workers, who were most seriously affected (CETU 1994a: 15). This act of insubordination set the stage for an open conflict and the eventual destruction of the relative autonomy that CETU had enjoyed.

5.3 Resubjugation

At the press conference Dawey hinted to differences within CETU, condemning 'some trade union leaders [who] give statements blessing the inflictions caused on the workers' and demanding that federations fall in line with CETU's Executive Committee in its willingness to 'struggle to protect and preserve the rights and interests of the workers' (CETU 1994a: 5). Indeed, the press statement 'provoked immediate reaction from both his opponents and supporters', and the dissenting leaders of six industrial federations issued statements distancing themselves from the leadership and its criticism of the government (Sikazwe 1994c: 3). The fault lines were unsurprisingly the same as those that had become apparent during CETU's founding congress. The group of trade unionists aligned with the government, and in several cases affiliated with the ruling party's proletarian branch, led several industrial federations. With the schism developing between CETU's leadership

and the government, they formed ‘a splinter group from within the Confederation with the objective of making it dysfunctional’ (Praeg 2006: 187).

The dissenting faction charged Dawey with having held the press conference without the approval of the Executive Committee or leaders of federations, and for having turned down a government offer to meet with CETU's Supreme Council. It characterised the leadership as ‘confrontational’, and accused it of showcasing a discriminatory attitude towards northerners (Tamene 1991: 1; Sunmonu 1994). A weeklong meeting of the Supreme Council failed to resolve the differences. Rather, it led to further acrimony and an open split. Allegedly, the proceedings were preceded by government harassment and intimidations (Mukupa 1994), and interrupted by ‘unruly behaviour and walk-out of some members of the council during the meeting, including the brandishing of a pistol’ (Sunmonu 1994). According to Dawey (2015, personal interview), some members of the dissenting faction had come dressed in military jackets and carrying arms – one threatening the chairman of the audit commission at gunpoint. In response, Dawey suspended 29 members of the council who had walked out, including Mekuria, on disciplinary grounds.

In the executive committee, the majority – six out of nine members – sided with CETU's president (Sikazwe 1994c). This was also the case in the Supreme Council, where 79 out of 108 sided with the leadership (ION[179] 1994a). But among the leaders of the industrial federations, six out of nine sided with the dissenting group (Sikazwe 1994c). The dissenters created a parallel structure of pro-government unionists labelling themselves ‘Peace and Free Trade Union Seeking Members of CETU's Supreme Council’ (PFTUSM), who alleged that under the prevailing circumstances no one had the right to act or speak in the name of CETU. As 35 of its members petitioned MoLSA asking it to arbitrate, 5 federation presidents[180] affiliated with the group wrote to MoLSA asking it to intervene and cancel the registration[181] of CETU altogether (Sunmonu 1994; Central High Court 1994). PFTUSM (1994) produced a document listing its grievances, which now included

[179] *Indian Ocean Newsletter*

[180] Namely those of the Energy Chemicals, Petroleum and Minerals Trade Union Federation; Food, Beverages and Tobacco Trade Unions Federation; Transport and Communications Trade Unions Federations; Tourism, Hotels and General Service Trade Unions Industrial Federation; and Agriculture, Fishery and Agro-Industrial Trade Unions Federation.

[181] This account was given by the minister of labour and social affairs to the court. EHRCO (1995: 63) corroborates the claim that the dissenting federation presidents petitioned for the cancellation of the Confederation. The presidents of the dissenting federations, however, later claimed that they had been opposed to deregistration in principle (Haileselassie Abraha et al. 1995).

the allegation that Dawey was seeking to 'direct the labour movement to serve the interests of the opposition[182] forces', that suspensions from the Executive Committee were based on ethnic discrimination, and that the leadership had embarked on a campaign 'mobilising support of rank and file members travelling throughout the country, dividing the movement on the ground of ethnic grouping'. Indeed, the split generated mobilisation and activity. CETU's leadership decided to call an extraordinary congress to resolve the situation, and arranging this required coordination with unions throughout the country. The leadership claimed that it had secured a quorum and a majority in the Supreme Council for suspending the 29 members, rendering the minority faction irrelevant to its legal right to call a congress. But instead of a congress, what followed was a prolonged court process punctuated by repeated mediation attempts and underlined by a government ban.

According to Praeg (2006: 187), 'prolonged litigation suited the members of the pro-system faction', and the manner in which they acted seems to corroborate this interpretation. OATUU Secretary General Hassan Sunmonu (1994), who undertook a mediation effort in late October 1994, returned frustrated with the stalling tactics that the group employed. 'I observed' Sunmonu reported, 'that the CETU president and his group were genuinely ready and willing to negotiate with the other group in order to peacefully resolve the crisis'. 'On the other hand', Sunmonu noted, 'the dramatis persona of the other group, namely, Mekuria Gebremedhin, CETU secretary general did not attend the two sessions of the reconciliation meeting'. From the lack of high-level representation and the dissenting group's unwillingness to agree even on an agenda for the discussions, Sunmonu concluded that 'it was apparent that [its delegation] either had no full mandate to negotiate or they were negotiating in bad faith'[183]. Meanwhile, the dissenting group encouraged all constituent unions to boycott the upcoming extraordinary congress, and several union leaders belonging to it publicly announced their intention to do so[184] (Tamene 1994; ION 1994b). It was becoming obvious that the Peace and Free Trade Union Seeking Members were

[182] The fact that opposition parties released statements in support of CETU (Sikazwe 1994c) may have contributed to this interpretation.
[183] This perception was supported by ICFTU representative Sikazwe (1995a: 6), who opined that 'it can be safely concluded that covert government support to Dawey's rivals is responsible for their belligerent conduct'.
[184] The overwhelming evidence and documentation (see, for example, the explicit statements to this end in *Ethiopian Herald* 1994b; 1994c; 1994d; 1994e) available on the dissenting group's opposition to the holding of the proposed congress did not stop its representatives from attempting to convince visiting foreign trade unionists, a few years later, that it was the CETU leadership that refused to call a congress (Schwass 1996).

seeking neither a negotiated resolution nor a resolution based on a congress majority, but only direct government intervention.

The failure of attempts to reconcile the groups meant that the contestation shifted to the question of holding a congress. While CETU's leadership argued that this was not only the most procedurally correct option, but also the most democratic, the dissenting faction was doing everything it could to call it off. The government, perhaps unsurprisingly, joined in on the dissenting group's side. Four days before the extraordinary congress was due to be held, uniformed and plain-clothed police, sent by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, arrived at the CETU headquarters. They occupied the president's office and banned CETU's Supreme Council from conducting a preparatory meeting, despite the fact that the majority of Supreme Council members had shown up (Dawey 1994c; EHRCO 1995: 64). This intervention was followed, a few days later, by a complete ban on CETU operations, including access to offices, vehicles and funds (Dawey 1994d). Sources cited by Tamene (1994: 1) claimed that 'the government may have found it necessary to block the meeting after the pro-government failed to galvanise enough labour support' and that had the extraordinary congress been held, a majority of delegates 'would have called for strikes against the structural adjustment, and would have endorsed the expulsion of the government group'. In any case, the government's intervention clearly indicated that it was operating under the assumption that the outcome of the congress would be detrimental to its interests, as represented in the labour movement by the PFTUSM faction. As a result, the extraordinary congress could not be held. An ICFTU representative, arriving at the CETU headquarters on the morning of the scheduled congress, learnt that no less than 30 police officers and MoLSA officials had closed and sealed CETU's offices (Sikazwe 1994a; 1994c). The officials argued that they were enforcing a court order suspending CETU's activities, which had been issued at the request of MoLSA, which, in turn, had been petitioned to do so by the dissenting group (MoLSA 1995a; Sikazwe 1994c). According to MoLSA's vice minister, 'the intervention was required to keep industrial peace' (Tamene 1994a). But MoLSA, never a credible neutral arbitrator, issued an additional threat, announcing its intention to cancel CETU's registration altogether if the matter was not resolved in one month's time (Sikazwe 1994b). In the absence of a permission to hold a congress, however, such a resolution never seemed likely, and the government's intervention strengthened the resolve of the dissenting faction, which now explicitly insisted on government mediation alone. This stand, a visiting ICFTU representative reported, 'gives merit to the fear that the group may be buying

time so as to allow the one month suspension notice to elapse and therefore give the government an excuse to withdraw CETU registration and establish a "conformist" organisation' (Sikazwe 1994b).

Before cancelling CETU's registration, a MoLSA attempt – whether genuine or not – at mediating failed, as it was accused of bias[185] by CETU's leadership, and as MoLSA insisted on CETU acknowledging that its decision to suspend the 29 Supreme Council members was illegal[186]. At the lapse of the one-month notice period, MoLSA announced the deregistration of CETU, claiming that 'no peaceful solution was in sight' (MoLSA 1995b). As the Confederation lodged an appeal to the High Court, the decision to deregister CETU was left pending. Instead, a court order was issued describing MoLSA's decision to close CETU's offices as 'inappropriate' and instructing it to allow its reopening (Wossenyeleh 1995; CETU 1995a: 34; Central High Court 1994). To the chagrin of CETU's leadership, MoLSA refused to heed the court order[187] and lift the blockade on CETU's offices. Moreover, it refused to recognise the legality of CETU's Supreme Council and Executive Committee, since the organisation was considered dissolved[188] (Dawey 1995b). MoLSA instead turned to the Federations, where a majority of leaders were dissenters, and, without basis in either CETU by-laws or labour legislation, instructed them to establish a joint interim committee to administer the confederation's property[189] (Wossenyeleh 1995). In Dawey's (1995a) assessment, this measure signalled the commencement of the process to reorganise an 'appendage confederation'. ICFTU Representative Sikazwe (1995a: 7) appeared to be of the same view, stating

[185] The question of government bias can be resolved quite straightforwardly. Not only did the government operate, at every conjuncture, in favour of the dissenting faction, but sometimes bias was more explicit. For example, an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were reported to have told representatives of the Canadian Labour Congress not to work with any of the three federations whose leadership supported CETU's leadership, and government representatives had stated that Dawey and his allies were working with the opposition (Kailembo 1995c). Moreover, it was reported that representatives of the dissenting faction turned up to meetings in government plated vehicles, and had been issued with rights to carry weapons (Schwass 1996).

[186] The argument was that, with the walk-out of the dissenters, no ¾ quorum prevailed. This argument was rejected by CETU who claimed that 94 out of 106 members had been present at the opening of the meeting, before the 29 members walked out (CETU 1995a; 1995b: 2).

[187] This indifference to a court decision convinced OATUU (1995) that the government 'aimed, without any doubt, at repressing CETU and finally, subjugating the trade union movement at a time when the situation of Ethiopian workers is seriously threatened'.

[188] A couple weeks after it had criticised the minister for acting outside of his jurisdiction in closing CETU offices and requested it to be reopened, however, the court, faced with the deregistration of CETU, closed the case on the basis of the dissolution of the latter.

[189] The leadership of the three industrial federations loyal with CETU's leadership rejected the call to join the interim committee (Sikazwe 1995a), and the court would eventually rule to affirm that MoLSA had no legal grounds to ask CETU to set up such a body (Sikazwe 1995d).

that ‘the setting up of an interim committee by the Ministry of Labour is a clear sign of government's intention to reorganise CETU in order to install its own people into trade union leadership’. MoLSA would face legal problems in having this open intervention accepted by courts, but the intervention was nevertheless significant in indicating the length to which the government was willing to go to see to it that the relative autonomy of CETU was terminated and that a deferential national centre emerged.

Meanwhile, repressive measures were brought to bear on supporters of CETU's independent line. In mid-November, Dawey (1994e) wrote to the ICFTU claiming that CETU delegates had been refused exit visas to attend meetings abroad. Moreover, he reported that harassment of workers' representative by police and security was ongoing across the country. This included the arrest of seven labour officials, dismissals, suspensions, and forced removals of five labour leaders, thorough surveillance and intimidation of representatives, and even physical assault[190] (Dawey 1994e; CETU 1995a). Combined with the ban on holding meetings and on calling a congress, these measures were interpreted as aimed at ‘paralysing the trade union movement’, a purpose for which the government had allegedly ‘mobilised all its resources (financial, security cadres, administrators, managers, shadow union leaders, mass media etc)’ (Dawey 1994e).

In early 1995, Dawey (1995b) had come to conclude that MoLSA was ‘waging a war of annihilation against the confederation’. By this time, it was reported that nine union leaders had been victims of extra-legal dismissals and that 80 out of 108 Supreme Council members had reported harassment or intimidation (Dawey 1994b; CETU 1995a). Moreover, an additional nine trade union leaders and some 80 members of EELPA's union were reported to have been dismissed by February 1995 (CETU 1995a). But the list of repressive measures and the gravity of the threat they posed would only grow in the months that followed. In early 1995, two senior CETU officials had fled abroad citing ‘persistent persecution’, and in March that year two labour leaders from EELPA would follow them across the Kenyan border and into exile (Sikazwe 1995a; 1995b). By the summer of 1995, Hailu Ourgessa, president of the Federation of of Commerce, Technical and

[190] The vice president of CETU had been attacked on his way home from the office in May 1994, and spent a week hospitalised (CETU 1995a: 15-16). Fekadu Tenkir (1997), a CETU Executive Committee member and president of the union of the Ethiopian Insurance Corporation, claimed to have been beaten by eight opponents while presiding over the annual congress of the union in March 1997.

Printing Industry Trade Unions, presented the following remarks to the workers' group of the International Labor Conference in Geneva (Hailu 1995):

> *[The government] has removed trade union leaders from their positions in unions forcefully, through political means, dismissal, forced resignation etc. Up to now 73 trade union leaders have lost their leadership without the consent and willingness of members. It has waged [a] massive terrorisation campaign, has physically assaulted the vice president of the confederation, has interrogated, harassed, intimidated, surveyed and imprisoned union leaders and their families. As a result of this campaign some of our colleagues are forced to leave their country and run into exile*

The government's position was, on the one hand, to deny these allegations and to claim that the entire affair was an internal dispute within CETU, which it was not a party to. But it also showcased a contradictory impulse to challenge CETU's leadership and openly involve itself in that dispute: rhetorically, practically, and legally. 'If Dawey believes that the Transitional Government of Ethiopia was anti-workers', the president of the transitional government stated, 'he should fight it instead of asking to be consulted by it' (EHRCO 1995: 62). In its communications, the government explicitly embraced the interpretation of the dissenting group that CETU's leadership had 'denied the democratic rights of its members and is taking arbitrary measures without the consent of the majority' (TGE 1995: 1). But there was no question that the government's claim to neutrality was somewhat disingenuous, and even if divisions existed within the movement – as it had between moderates and militants, government-aligned and autonomous trade unionists in previous times – the state's role was much more than that of an even-handed arbitrator in the conflict. The degree to which it intervened was such that it was becoming *the* adverse party, and not only *a* party to the conflict. This can be illustrated by the testimony of former CETU branch secretary of Amhara and Benishangul Gumuz Getachew Abera (2017, personal interview). A supporter of CETU's executive committee, Getachew was first subject to attempted persuasion, including being called to the office of a senior EPRDF official. There he was promised that should he drop his support for the leadership he would be rewarded with attractive employment opportunities, but he was also warned about the fallout should he fail to do so. When this proved ineffective, Getachew was labelled an 'anti-peace' element and subjected to harassment that included constant surveillance, and, in one incident when visiting a Bahir Dar beverage factory, being threatened with a gun. The threat of physical harm meant that in the years that followed Getachew would circumscribe his movement to Addis Ababa. A couple of years later, when CETU was being refounded along pro-

government lines, he was warned by EHRCO sources, CBE union officials, and an EPRDF insider who, independent of one another, had received information that his life was in danger. As a result, he left the country.

CETU's application for ICFTU affiliation lodged in June 1994 was left pending. Because of the turmoil that engulfed CETU in the following months, ICFTU's Executive Board meeting in December that year decided to suspend the admission process. The ICFTU had 'strongly condemned' the deregistration of CETU, which it interpreted 'as representing a naked aggression by the authorities against the autonomy and independence of the Ethiopian trade union movement' (ICFTU 1994), and it had protested the government's non-adherence to court orders obliging it to reopen CETU's offices, allow its officials to carry out their tasks, return requisitioned property, and unfreeze its bank accounts (Jordan 1995). In early 1995, ICFTU began extending relief and legal support funds to CETU (Dawey 1995c; Dewil 1995). However, the provision of such funds was limited, both in terms of amount and in duration. Moreover, it was apparent that the international trade union movement was split on the issue. While the ICFTU, the Canadian Labour Congress, and initially the OATUU offered CETU some financial and political support, the AALC, still represented by Fissehatsion Tekie, was considered 'sympathetic' to the pro-government faction, and was alleged to be 'financing activities' of its six federations (Sikazwe 1995a: 5).

Consistent with the first cycle, a protracted process of establishing new deferential structures ensued, although this time accompanied by considerably lesser violence. First, and as mentioned, the government working with the dissenting faction established an ad-hoc committee at the level the latter was dominant: among the presidents of the industrial federations. Secondly, state-aligned actors began to campaign for the ouster of union leaders deemed disloyal at the basic union level. 'New committees were set up in factories' throughout the country (Praeg 2006: 187), while old structures were taken over. A lot of 'work at the grassroot levels in order to win the members at the local level' was another component of this, not surprisingly incurring the charge 'that the government [was] interfering in trade union affairs' (Kailembo 1995c: 1). In fact, a representative of the International Federation of Employees, Technicians and Managers visiting Ethiopia reported that the government was ready to use any means, including 'intimidation, harassment and bribes' in order to 'capture' resistant unions (Schwass 1996). At the Fincha sugar plant, for example, local authorities removed nine members of the union's executive committee for having refused their

demand that they denounce CETU's leadership (CETU 1995a). As early as 1995, a large number of other intransigent workers' representatives were reported to have been removed, dismissed or transferred from places such as EELPA, Bahir Dar Textile Factory, Dedessa plantation, Ethio-plastic plant, Shakisso mine, Ethiopian Insurance Corporation, CETU's Jimma and Nekemte branch offices, Gomma coffee plantation, a public shop union, Tika agricultural plant, Ethio-Djibouti Railway, and Wabe Shebelle Hotel[191] (CETU 1995a: 21-26; Dawey 1995a). The dismissed and arrested representatives included members of CETU's Supreme Council and Executive Committee. In the summer of 1995 CETU president Dawey was himself briefly detained[192] and that same autumn he was ousted from the leadership of the basic union and federation he represented, after elections to which he had not been nominated. For ICFTU representative Sikozwe (1995c), this indicated 'that the government is making serious inroads in the trade unions and swaying the rank and file support to its side'.

At the federation level too, the three leaderships still aligned with CETU's Executive Committee were put under additional pressure. A seventh federation gave in to the pressure and switched allegiances without any open coercion, but the Federation of Commerce, Technical and Printing Industry Trade Unions had to be closed down and sealed off before it could be taken over in 1996, taking the number of government-aligned federations to eight (Praeg 2006: 187-188). 'Observers were aware of the reality that all of the above developments (spanning the transitional period) were in conflict with the legal process, which was still pending', Praeg (2006: 187) assessed[193]. The following excerpts from an EHRCO (1996: 5-6) report vividly illustrates some typical mechanisms that facilitated the process:

> *On October 19, 1996, the [Commerce, Technical and Printing Industry] Federation's 152 Council members representing 47 member plant unions held a meeting. After discussing the work done so far and the Audit Committee's report, the meeting was adjourned for the next morning to discuss the remaining agendas.*

[191] Responding to these allegations, the government claimed that while it was 'unable to confirm the arrest and detention reported by CETU', dismissals and suspensions are the prerogatives of employers with which 'the government cannot interfere' (TGE 1995: 4). The government, it announced, 'has no interest in [CETU's] affairs' (TGE 1995: 6). With regards to the mass media campaign in full swing, the TGE (1995: 4) stated that each faction 'use the free press and media to air their own separate views' and that 'the government in no way can control the freedom of expression of citizens as well as association'. In view of the fact that the largest media outlets were state owned and directed, this comes across as a bit disingenuous.

[192] This was, according to Dawey (1997), his third detainment, each one occurring that same year and lasting between 8 and 10 hours.

[193] See also CETU (1995b) for a thorough treatment of the legality of the government's intervention in the first place.

When the discussion on the next agendas commenced on October 20, about 30 factionalists began to stir trouble by demanding that the Federation's Executive Committee give up the podium and submit themselves to a gimgema (assessment) of their performance. When the other Council members rejected their unprocedural demand, the former began shouting and prevented the meeting from proceeding smoothly. In order to avoid the break out of violence, it was decided to adjourn the meeting. However, 30 of these factionalists remained behind and tried to proceed with the discussion on their own. At this time the Executive Committee of the Federation reported the matter to Woreda 15 Police Station and the latter evicted the factionalists from the meeting hall. On the evening of October 21, however, Ethiopian Radio and Television reported an incredible piece of news. The official media falsely claimed that at its meeting of October 19 - 21, the Federation of the Commercial, Technical and Printing Federation rejected the reports of the Executive Committee as well as Audit Committee, replaced these committees' members by newly elected ones and passed a resolution demanding that CETU be newly re-organised. Following this false report on the official media, Ato Tesfaye Sodano, deputy minister of labour and social affairs, wrote a letter on November 4, 1996 giving recognition to the newly "elected" leaders.

Having secured the government's support, the "new federation leaders", accompanied by two policemen, went to the head office of the Federation where they found Ato Mulatu Gurmu, the legitimate treasurer, working alone in his office. They assaulted him physically, took away from him the keys of his drawers and office, his personal notebook and money, and then evicted him by force from the office. They also broke into the other offices of the Federation and thus staged their coup. Surprisingly though, two of these "new federation leaders" do not belong to any member plant union and hence are not even members of the Federation.

Although Ato Mulatu Gurmu has reported the attack against him to Woreda 18 Police Station and Office of the Public Prosecutor, no legal action as yet been taken against the aggressors in accordance with the Law.

The purge described in the above is corroborated by a number of sources and correspondent accounts from the time[194]. It furthermore does not seem to constitute an exceptional case, but rather an indicative example of the machinations followed in cases where basic unions or federations resisted advances for reorganisation, or for the

[194] See, for example, the vice president of the concerned federation's account (Ali 1996). According to him, the hostile manoeuvring by the dissenting faction supported by the government was triggered by the federation's refusal to join the interim committee of federations, established by the government to run CETU affairs and eventually reorganise it. The federation's refusal was premised on the ongoing court process, and the perceived unconstitutionality of a minority group of Supreme Council members reorganising the confederation. The federation instead demanded that a general congress be held. Within the federation, the vice president wrote, the dissenting faction had only managed to acquire support from 7 out of 54 basic unions, and 9 out of 52 council members to overturn this stance. Hence the resort to coercive strategies.

replacement of leadership deemed hostile. In basic unions too, foul play facilitated the process of turning resistant leaderships.

> *[T]he trade union of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia was prevented from carrying out its normal functions by the Labor and Social Affairs Bureau of Region 14 on the pretext that the term of office of the union executives has expired. As a result the executives have been unable to call a union meeting to hold an election. The Bank's management has also made the executives to take forced leaves.*
>
> *Again, the Labour and Social Affairs Bureau of Addis Ababa Region, although fully aware that the terms of office of the union executives expired on March 7, 1997, barred the Ethiopian Insurance Corporation Trade Union from carrying out its functions in a letter dated June 13, 1996. On the basis of the Bureau's letter, the Corporation's management, too, wrote a letter dated June 25, 1996 barring the union executives from carrying out their trade union duties. After getting the necessary permission, when the labour leaders called a meeting of union members to explain to them the problem at hand, the Labour and Social Affairs Bureau cancelled the meeting through its letter of August 6, 1996. The union's application to the Region 14 Administration for permission to hold a meeting was also rejected through the Administration's letter of August 8, 1996. Repeated applications to hold a union meeting were rejected by the above offices* (EHRCO 1996: 6).

Around this time, the court process over CETU's future, which had stalled when the government-sponsored interim committee was denied the right to represent CETU and administer its property, was helped by the 'dropping' of two of the three judges on the appeal court deemed too sympathetic to CETU's case (Sikazwe 1995c; Schwass 1996). This paved the road for the eventual 'right ruling' (Schwass 1996).

The process of organising a new CETU along loyalist deferential lines gained new momentum in January 1997 when eight of the nine industrial federations met and formed an eighteen member Coordinating Committee to Reorganise CETU (1997). Between April 22 and 24, these eight federations held a General Congress. On the final day of the congress the courts threw out the last obstacle in the form of an appeal lodged by Dawey (Kailembo 1997b), clearing the path to the emergence of a reconstituted CETU and ending the contestation over the trade union structures. A new deferential CETU, clear of any assertive ambitions, was born, its novelty illustrated by the fact that its entire executive committee – save one member – consisted of new elects (Egulu 1997). An observer to the congress concluded that it 'clearly shows that manoeuvres from the Ethiopian government have paid off'. But while 'on the surface everything seemed rosy', it was also reported that 'a lot of behind-the-scene moves' took place (Kailembo 1997c). In this way whatever risk that

an unpleasant surprise like that of the 1994 congress would reoccur was eliminated. Rather than a celebration of union democracy, the ICFTU observer of the congress reported that it 'marks the climax of interference by the Ethiopian government into CETU affairs' (Egulu 1997:1).

By now, international affiliates were also becoming more prone to accept the termination of relatively autonomous trade unionism, some more enthusiastically than others. AALC had made its embrace of the prevailing forces explicit, participating and delivering an address to the congress and pledging to work with the new confederation (Kailembo 1997c; Egulu 1997). Suspicions about the activities of especially its Nairobi based representative Fissehatsion Tekie had become so serious that there had developed 'a consensus among ICFTU and major affiliates to keep [him] out of Ethiopia (and Eritrea) because he cooperates with the government to keep trade unions in line' (Schwass 1996). But OATUU[195] and ILO had also 'in effect given recognition to the new leadership' (Kailembo 1997c). And despite having reported gross interferences, and arguing that the time was not yet ripe for cooperation, ICFTU was also slowly beginning to change footing (Schwass 1996). Its regional general secretary Kailembo (1997a) argued that because the dissenting group were now in majority, they could no longer be ignored. The argument was based on the familiar argument about 'the strategic importance of Ethiopia in Africa' (Kailembo 1997a). International Transport Workers' Federation' general secretary David Cockroft (1997) agreed with this assessment, pointing to the perceived danger of the refounded CETU orienting itself towards the more independent OATUU over ICFTU, bluntly stating that 'it is time to mend fences'. 'We should also recognise', ICFTU African regional General Secretary Kailembo (1997c) wrote 'the fact that the government has succeeded in breaking up CETU and making it a pro-government organ'. It would take the ICFTU another five years to fully normalise relations with this organ.

The situation for remaining representatives and unions unwilling to submit was becoming grimmer. Immediately before the reorganising congress Dawey and two other CETU leaders fled to Kenya, citing around-the-clock harassment and explicit warnings from several sources of an alleged government plan 'to cause severe injury' to them, potentially including long periods of detention or worse (Dawey et al. 1997). The banking and insurance federation, which strenuously

[195] With regards to OATUU, the change of heart of its general secretary, Sunmonu, appears to have been sudden and sharp. He was reported to have told congress delegates not to 'disappoint Africa, *your government* and OATUU' [emphasis added], and to have promised them to assert pressure on the absent Bank and Insurance Federation to join them and to work with the government (Egulu 1997c: 2).

refused to be reorganised within the new CETU, was again the last one to submit. This intransigence came to an end through an alleged 'coup' in 1999, for which the ground had been prepared among member unions for some time. In the union of the Ethiopian Insurance Corporation, for example, new elections were held in January 1998 and 'stage managed' to assure that union leaders with 'political backing' replaced the old leadership (Alemseged 2000: 11). Other constituent unions were allegedly 'frozen' and prevented from operating and meeting (Abiy 1998). In 1999, control had been gained over a sufficient number of unions within the industrial federation to topple the leadership, a feat which was expedited by the forced retirement of the federation president, Abiy Melesse. The largest union of the federation, that of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, stood out as an exception which was 'strong enough' to prevent subversion and uphold a combative line for at least another year (Alemseged 2000: 33-34). Abiy himself had begun to 'fear for his life' (ILO 2000: 23/75), and would go into exile shortly after his ouster[196].

At this point, the context requires consideration. While the Ethiopian Teacher's Association (ETA) is not the subject of study here, the conflict and repression it was embroiled in very much related to the situation of CETU. A conflict between the government and ETA had been simmering since 1992. Bank accounts had been frozen, offices ransacked and sealed, splits had been fomented and a new organisation emerged with government recognition, the leadership was harassed, while members loyal to the leadership were dismissed across the country (Praeg 2006: 193). None of this had been sufficient, however, to rub out the original ETA. In 1996 its chairman, Taye Woldesemayat, was imprisoned and eventually given a fifteen year sentence for allegedly having been member of an illegal armed opposition movement[197]. ETA executive member Assefa Maru was shot to death by security forces on his way to the office the next year. According to eyewitnesses the shooting was not preceded by any warning, while the government claimed that he had attempted to evade arrest. The fact that police entered the ETA offices and thoroughly searched it the same day, however, suggests that the target was the association and its representatives, rather than any one individual (ION 1997). 'ETA officials have become favourite targets of the Ethiopian authorities, who are apparently determined to use any means to break the trade union', the *Indian Ocean Newsletter* (1997) reported. All this provided relevant context and

[196] Abiy Melesse was a veteran trade unionist who had reportedly spent over two years in jail during the PMAC/WPE government. Sometime after going into exile in the United States, in 2006, he was shot to death by an acquaintance.
[197] He would spend six years in jail before being released.

lingered heavy on the minds of resistant trade unionists. As there had been only half-hearted attempts to conceal these measures, this deterrent effect was likely an intended purpose. It influenced the decisions of dozens of trade unionists to go into exile, and it must have also worked to convince those staying behind of the prudence of keeping a lower profile.

5.4 Aftermath

The reassertion of control over the structures of the labour movement caused fallout on a number of levels. The Ethiopian government was severely criticised for the intolerance and bias it had showcased, both domestically and internationally[198], but judging by the employment of similar strategies when faced with undesirable organisational constellations[199] in the years that followed, it appears that the outcome was considered in positive terms. For the new loyalist CETU, however, the problems relating to its lack of legitimacy would continue to linger.

A number of obstacles kept complicating CETU's relations with parts of the international trade union movement. These included CETU's silence on the forced removal of independent-minded trade unionists including Abiy Melesse, the imprisonment of Taye Woldesemayat, the death of Assefa Maru, and the deportation of trade unionists of Eritrean citizenry during the Ethio-Eritrean war (Jordan 1999; Kailembo 1999). These concerns were not important to AALC and ILO, who had been working with and supporting CETU since the 1997 congress (Kailembo 1999), but they remained obstacles to CETU's relationship with the ICFTU and some of its member federations. In the most sharp-worded statement, the president of the Canadian Labour Congress rebutted a CETU request for normalisation of relations saying ‘we have followed with dismay the erosion of independent trade unionism in your country including the killing, arrest, and forcing into exile of real workers representatives … [and] we agree with the ICFTU/AFRO policy of isolating those inside the country who are collaborating with the current government and not speaking out against the violation of trade union rights’ (White 1999). If this was ever the policy of ICFTU, however, its practice by 1999 was different. Two months after the above cited letter was written an ICFTU AFRO delegation visited CETU, and although it staked out a path to normalisation (Kailembo 1999), it would take until 2004 before CETU was readmitted to ICFTU.

[198] See EHRCO (1995, 1996), and the reports and protest letters from OATUU (1995) and ICFTU cited in the above.
[199] Both civil society organisations – such as the ETA – and a number of legally registered political parties have since found themselves having offices closed, bank accounts blocked, splits fomented, and courts' rulings favouring the dissenting faction issued against them, in an eerily similar fashion.

Despite, then, eventually regaining international recognition, it was a wing-clipped CETU enjoying little legitimacy that prevailed. There were palpable doubts over the degree to which the organisation represented the genuine interests of Ethiopian workers. In 2001 an Ethiopian newspaper ridiculed the leader of CETU at the time, Amare Alemayehu, for having stated that CETU 'does not believe that strikes can resolve industrial disputes' (John W.: 2001). This standpoint of CETU, the author claimed, hollows the constitutional stipulation of the right to strike, 'outrageously disparages the great sacrifices of workers in Ethiopia', and poses question as to whose interests CETU's leadership really represent (John W.: 2001). The following year the US Department of State (DoS 2003) reported that 'publicised allegations of widespread corruption within CETU's leadership ranks and of CETU's close ties to the Government have paralysed the organisation'. ICFTU's *Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights* from the same year reported that 'the government blatantly interferes in trade union affairs in all sectors', with 'many trade union leaders [having] been removed from their posts and/or forced to leave the country'[200]. It stated that 'trade union leaders are still being sent to prison because they sought to protect their rights, while many more are sacked simply for forming a trade union' (ICFTU 2003). The next year DoS (2004) reported that although, unlike previous years, it had no reports of union leaders being forcefully removed or forced into exile, 'government interference in unions' nevertheless continued, and was described in the following terms:

> *CETU leadership was aligned with the ruling party and did not fight vigorously for workers' rights. Findings of widespread corruption in 2002 within CETU's leadership had not resulted in any disciplinary actions by year's end. In January, four members of CETU's nine-member executive committee, who criticised the majority five-member block's decisions were forced from office and replaced by four members hand-picked by the Government.*

In 2005, the same department reported that 'complete government control of the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU)'s executive committee continued throughout the year'. In 2007, more serious infringements were reported, including the harassment, intimidation and imprisonment of union leaders by security collaborating with employers. This allegedly included militia and police killing labour activists working on a sugar cane project in the Afar region, but a request from the concerned industrial federation that the government investigate the violence was allegedly ignored (DoS 2008). Harassment continued to be reported by the end of the decade,

[200] This precise wording would reappear in each consecutive issue of the annual survey until at the very least 2012.

targeting union members and organisers, and including frequent dismissals of activists, with 'lawsuits alleging unlawful dismissal often [taking] years to resolve because of case backlogs in the courts' (DoS 2011). None of this resulted in any meaningful protest from CETU being registered, much less any resistance. But by 2008 employers' harassment of union leaders and organisers had become so severe that the CETU congress denounced 'the rising number of violations of workers' rights and of those of their trade union representatives, who are facing "serious problems" in several companies' (ITUC 2009). That same year it was reported that ten workers including three union officials at the Bole Printing Enterprise in Addis Ababa had been suspended, and that similar dismissals had taken place at Kaliti Food Factory[201] and the Dashen beer brewery (ITUC 2009).

These allegations represent only the tip of the iceberg in terms of reported infringement of union rights by both employers and the state[202]. It remains true, as was stated in a DoS (2004) report from over a decade ago, that since the first labour proclamation of the EPRDF government came into effect no strike that has come to the attention of the concerned courts has been considered legal. Moreover, many newly established corporations refuse their workers the right to organise altogether, contravening labour legislation but facing no sanction from the government or courts. In one of the recently constructed industrial parks that is meant to spearhead Ethiopia's industrial transformation, for example, it was reported that only 3 out of 17 enterprises had tolerated that workers established a union (Dawit 2017a: 11). At the massive Huajian shoe factory, meanwhile, workers who attempted to form a unions were dismissed, and at the Sheraton Addis Hotel 65 unionised workers were dismissed in the midst of bargaining for a new collective agreement (Kirubel 2014). The dismissed included the entire union board, and despite attempts to appeal to courts the conflict was only resolved two years later when Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide intervened responding to international pressure. Similar transgressions – including harassment and dismissals of union organisers – have been reported in the horticulture industry (Hanan 2011; Tewodros 2010). According to an official of the Industrial Federation of Textile, Leather and Garment Workers' Trade Unions this reflects the reality that workers at three quarters

[201] The problems faced by the Kaliti Food Factory union in its relationship with management – it was a state-owned enterprise at the time – was confirmed by the union chairman, who claimed that the management 'tried to divide the union' (Teshome and Teklemedhin 2015, personal interview).

[202] See, for example, the numerous reports from ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association and ICFTU's/ITUC's Annual Survey of Violation of Trade Union Rights.

of all Ethiopian enterprises are denied the right to unionise (Dijkstra 2015). The emasculation of the Ethiopian labour movement has had severe repercussions on the rights and conditions of Ethiopian labour. The effects on wages is something that is discussed in the next chapter.

5.5 Constraining factors

As has been noted, the second cycle described in the above was neither as profound nor as protracted as the first. Nevertheless the renewed stirrings, organisational efforts and eventual confrontation constituted a distinct process against the background of the docility of the prior decade. But the emergent movement had its wings clipped and its autonomy curtailed early. On the one hand, it could be argued that the collision with the state prematurely ended a process of renewed mobilisation, but on another, it may be argued that the abrupt manner in which it came to an end indicates the shallowness of the process and the weakness of the movement in the first place, and that these two aspects – the relative shallowness, and the relative brevity – of the process constituted two sides of the same coin.

Conflict, once it erupted in earnest, was mostly localised at the central level, and what resistance was attempted took place in court rooms and offices rather than on the shop-floors and in the streets. Although there was rank-and-file involvement and pressures that moved the leadership to take an assertive stand, those pressures were given no viable outlet. Despite part-taking in localised unrest and organisation, the rank-and-file was not mobilised for the decisive confrontation that followed. In that sense, the process was relatively shallow when compared to the first cycle. While, in the 1960 and 1970s, workers struggled for years despite a state that was at the very least equally repressively inclined as that of the 1990s, a similar kind of rank-and-file mobilisation and activity never prevailed during the second cycle. The reasons for this are several, but among these constraining factors there were few novelties. In fact, it could be argued that most of these factors prevailed in greater magnitude during the first cycle.

Bureaucratisation does not, in the main, appear to have been a factor with major impact on the movement. Labour officials were at the forefront of the attempt to carve out an autonomous space for the labour movement, despite the risks involved. Top officials of CETU, however, were very well remunerated[203]. High salaries were established after open debate as a measure to pre-empt the

[203] The CETU president earned 1800 ETB/month, branch secretaries 1000 ETB (Dawey 1995d). Federation President Hailu Ourgessa (2017, personal interview) characterised his as ‘the salary of a minister’.

risk of financial incentives being used to subvert individual labour leaders (Hailu 2017, personal interview). One could of course very well argue that the opposite is true: that material privilege and separation from the rank-and-file would instil a cautiousness and render labour leaders less willing to risk their position. Over the longer term those dynamics could potentially have become decisive, but for the short term, and perhaps because of the brevity of tenure that CETU's high officials enjoyed, this does not appear to have constituted a major moderating force: most top labour officials were apparently willing to risk that privilege.

With regards to relations with and pressures from the state, there were no major departures from the established path. Such pressures, again, proved a major – even decisive perhaps – constraining factor to the emergence of an assertive labour movement. 'History repeats itself', Dawey (1994b) wrote to the ICFTU, 'the confederation at its inception, is confronted with such difficulties as infringements of trade union rights [and] violent repression of its activities'[204]. 'Unfortunately', he continued 'the Transitional Government of Ethiopia and/or the party in power has [since the beginning] been engaged in outright suppression of the confederation with a view to make it its own wing'. The motive of the government, he alleged was to 'formally subordinate the confederation to the control of the party in power so that it will play the role of a transmission belt'. Indeed, in this respect there was a strong flavour of history repeating itself.

Neither were the methods of re-establishing state control very new. The list of grievances in late 1994, included refusal to register or recognise large unions – such as those of the Akaki Textile and Garment Factories and the Ethio-Fibre factory – that were considered resistant; interference in the internal processes of constituent unions including dismissal of union representatives; refusal to turn over union property held by the government; launching of derogatory mass media campaigns; and harassment and intimidation of workers' representatives (Dawey 1994b; CETU 1995a). CETU president Dawey (2015, personal interview) describes the severity of repression in the following terms:

[204] The references to the past, and to events discussed in the previous chapter, were manifold. According to Hailu Ourgessa (2017, personal interview), members of Mekuria's PFTUSM faction referred to the seventh floor of the CETU building – where the intransigent Federations of Commerce, Technique and Printing Industry and of Banking and Insurance had their offices – as 'Assimba', the name of the mountain base of EPRP's army in the 1970s, denoting the perception that those federations were somehow linked to the latter. Moreover, Hailu recalls that members of the government-aligned faction 'reminded us many times that this area, this building, this trade union movement, is used to blood, telling us that blood might flow if we follow the same line'.

> *They mobilised every force under their power against the workers. From the headquarter of the confederation, down to the primary union, even the remotest, this Fibre industry in Gambela — they allocated cadres and started removing leaders from the primary unions, arresting them, killing some.*

The alleged killings, according to Dawey's estimation, took the lives of around 59 labour leaders around the country (Dawey, 2015, personal interview). That number, however, must, for the time being at least, be considered unverified. 'The present government has been much less violent than the [previous] but equally unwilling to tolerate an independent trade union movement' Dessalegn (2002: 114) has written. 'Its favoured tactic since the 1990s has been to force a split in the trade unions considered hostile to its policies and then give its support in favour of friendly leaders', he continued, describing a more established pattern that only rarely included lethal force. 'On occasions', rather, 'independent minded leaders have been harassed, thrown in jail on trumped up charges, or forced to flee the country'.

The state, then, proved prepared to go to great lengths, taking severe measures to rein in the autonomy that the labour movement enjoyed. But it did not necessarily go any further than what it had done under previous governments. In fact, it can be argued that state repression, although very important in bringing an end to the second cycle, was less intense and widespread than under, at the very least, the previous cycle. For that reason, the rather rapid halt the movement grinded to – when compared to the several years of intense struggle against terroristic violence in the 1970s – cannot be explained in terms of state repression alone.

State intervention, by encouraging a dissenting faction from within the movement and preying on internal divisions, resembled the strategy deployed during the first cycle. The TGE 'had done all its preparatory job to draw its stooges in the movement so that it [would] fight from within to pursue its political ends' a CETU (1995a: 10) document read. 'By monopolising the leadership of the Organising Committee the pro-government members succeeded in holding federations executive leaderships through rigged elections', it stated. 'Among the nine federations they succeeded in holding majority positions in five, which now sparked the split', it explained its looming demise. However, as plausible as some of the allegations contained here seem – especially in light of the fact that active dissent from within the movement actually came almost exclusively from the leaderships of those federations – there would have been nothing new with attempting to subvert the movement from within, in order to charge at it from without. The movement in the

1970s was subjected to the precise same methods, where, initially, Alem Abdi had played the role of the internal spoiler, giving cover to government intervention. However, this had initially proved unsuccessful as Alem Abdi was ousted and the government was forced to recall its decision closing CELU's headquarters. Fomented divisions and splits, alone at least, is not then sufficient to explain the demise of the autonomous labour movement.

Dawey had argued that an inherited obstacle originated in the fact that the history of Ethiopian labour movementism was marked by the rise and fall of regimes, that all previous and contemporaneous governments had viewed the movement as a threat and 'devised annexations methods' to assert control over them, and that this had 'left the movement without experience, education and strong structure of trade unionism' (CETU 1995a: 9). But when judged against the discussion contained in the previous chapter, this holds only partially true. Indeed, successive governments had viewed the labour movement as a threat and had tried to establish control over it. However, success in this endeavour was by no means guaranteed, and it had faced continuous resistance. The PMAC/WPE had put in place an impressive internal and external control regime, which effectively checked the development of assertiveness through the 1980s. But structures intended to carry out a vertical control function in one context can assume a very different role when the context or the balance of forces is altered, as the years around the demise of the WPE would demonstrate.

History also somewhat repeated itself in terms of the role played by the international 'free' trade union movement, and the moderating pressures it asserted. While initially supportive of a certain autonomy of the Ethiopian labour movement, this support was not without conditions, and international affiliates would again attempt to check the movement's assertiveness, if not to the same extent as during the first cycle. When CETU, in the midst of an onslaught, planned 'a major demonstration' for February 26, 1995, ICFTU African regional General Secretary Kailembo (1995a) was 'trying to convince Dawey not to carry out such a demonstration for the time', claiming it would be 'counter-productive'. Indeed, the demonstration was never held. Fissehatsion Tekie, meanwhile, the former general secretary of CELU and an ardent collaborator with ICFTU, notably again was involved in exercising restraining pressure in the 1990s, this time as a representative of the AALC. Several CETU leaders testifies to this role of his (Hailu 2017, personal interview; Dawey 2015, personal interview; Getachew 2017, personal interview). The president of

the Federation of Commerce, Technique and Printing Industry Unions, who was a supporter of CETU's leadership, for example, affirm that Fissehatsion offered him a scholarship abroad in order to remove one of the central 'troublemakers' (Hailu, 2017 personal interview). There are allegations that similar offers from the same source were responsible for turning at least one federation president to the side of the government-aligned faction (Dawey 2015, personal interview; Hailu 2017, personal interview). Moreover, the disbursement of AALC funds to federations rather than the confederation did a lot to weaken the national centre and strengthen centrifugal forces at a key conjuncture. Eventually, AALC support for the federation-based interim committee implied an open commitment to support these forces. In the end, the manner in which former labour officials were treated by supposed allies in the international trade union movement clearly contrasted with earlier batches and demonstrated the attitude dominant in the latter. The care that the international 'free' trade union movement showed for the CELU top officials was quite extraordinarily generous, but the new CETU exiles were not treated with any resembling level of welcome. Initial refugees of the movement arriving in Nairobi were given some emergency support from ICFTU (Sikazwe 1995b), but the latter's attitude soon shifted. New and remaining exiled leaders (Hailu 2017, personal interview; Kailembo 1995b; Laurijssen 1995) not only had applications for financial support rejected, but were urged to return to Ethiopia. All in all, while it was certainly not a decisive factor in determining the orientation of the labour movement during the second cycle, the carrots and sticks wielded by the international trade union movement was nevertheless generally geared towards inducing moderation.

Issues of lesser importance identified in the first cycle have been mentioned within the second cycle too. Once again, there were episodes and fault-lines reinforced by perceived or real national divisions, but once again this factor is easily exaggerated. There were accusation of discriminatory attitudes against northerners in the executive committee, which mirrored accusation against the dissenting faction as having its origin in recruitment drives of the ruling party among such northerners. Reports (Schwass 1995), meanwhile, mentioned the suspicion that government intervention was motivated by the desire to have one nationality dominate union leadership. But beyond ostensibly constituting one factor behind the emergence of a minority faction, there are no indications that workers and workers' representatives perceived of their interests as, or acted as if they were, as anything but, at the very least, conjoined. Most importantly, it was the workers that overwhelmingly and decisively rejected the government-initiated proposal of organising the

movement along regional/national lines. And even if national/ethnic origin had some level of tendency to converge with faction divisions, the former factor can consequently not carry more weight than the effects of the factional split that it may have conditioned. As it has been found that the prevalence of a dissenting minority was not decisive in determining the labour movement's orientation, it logically follows that any factor that merely contributed to this prevalence cannot be considered any more so.

The economic weakness of the labour movement has been proposed as a general factor determining its eventual subordination. This factor has two relevant aspects. On the one hand, the years of PMAC/WPE rule had significantly improved the material resources available to the movement. On the other, it had enhanced vulnerability, in terms of employees and facilities that required continuous flows of funds. This was seized upon by the government, which froze assets that could have served as strike funds, including 2.5 million ETB of liquid means, as well as numerous valuable real estate (Tamene 1994: 1). While in theory, the relative wealth of the movement compared to previous times could have served as an asset, it also came to constitute a liability. Either way, the importance of this factor should probably not be exaggerated, as it was when the labour movement was at its economically weakest – having lost the support of the state and its international allies in the mid-1970s – that it staged its most formidable campaigns. The situation of the wage working population at large has also been forwarded as an explanation of moderation. Tamene (1994:1) mentioned, as a factor why he deemed it unlikely that workers would vigorously defend CETU, that 'with [an] unemployment rate far exceeding the nation's half a million [sic] workforce, many workers may find it difficult to sacrifice their jobs'. This argument very much dovetails that of Killion (1984), pertaining to workers in imperial Ethiopia, where unemployment was just as much of a ravaging problem. But as has been demonstrated, it did not prevent workers from engaging in sustained campaigns of unrest and resistance during that conjuncture. By itself then, it appears to be an unsubstantiated conclusion that the vulnerability of Ethiopian wage workers determines pragmatism and moderation. But if looked at in terms of a defensive struggle, within a negative cycle rather than a positive one, it may take on a higher level of importance.

None the factors described in the above then – important as they may be to different degrees and in different contexts – can effectively explain why the growth of assertiveness was cut short with such relative simplicity in the 1990s. None of the factors can be claimed to constitute a determinant

factor, even if state repression probably can be seen as having been decisive within the immediate context it took place. But to identify the reasons why state curtailment and repression was instantly so much more effective in the 1990s than in the 1970s, one has to look for other factors. One such factor, which is identified as the demonstrative/inspirational factor in the previous chapter, is notable also in its absence or in an inverted shape. It needs to be noted that the second cycle described in the above was a cycle of defensive manoeuvres and retreats rather than offensive measures and advances. This time, there was no radicalism in terms of demands to shift the strategic position of workers relative to capital, nor to significantly enhance the workplace power of workers. The first stirrings, the rumblings of strikes, and the scramble to organise where all motivated by the necessity to defend the immediate interest of workers who had experienced a precipitous decline in their leverage and conditions, and were now faced with renewed assaults. All major workplace incidents were motivated by such defensive concerns to protect what little was left. It is telling that the conflict between the state and CETU, as well as within CETU, originated in, on the one hand, the adoption of an SAP that was assumed – rightly so – to result in retrenchments and further decline of real wages, and, on the other, a renewed attempt to bring its structures under control. What the workers could hope to achieve from this, at least in the short-term perspective, was only to arrest these processes, but hardly to reverse them or make any meaningful advances – no such goals were, at least, ever formulated. While erecting defensive positions may constitute a powerful motivating factor, it may be argued that it does not breed the same offensive, triumphant and optimistic atmosphere as the ascending cycle of unrest and organisation driving the position and leverage of workers forward, and resulting in demonstrable material and social gains.

5.6 Conducive factors

Much like the above mentioned constraining factors, there were few novelties among the factors that drove the development of what assertiveness that emerged in the second cycle. But herein appears to lay one major difference from the previous cycle: the relatively lesser magnitude of all identified conducive factors. Moreover, when compared to the first cycle, there were some notable absences.

During the second cycle, the labour movement found no effective external allies, and was not able stake out a space of manoeuvre within a broader popular movement, as had CELU in the 1970s.

To be sure, there were offers of support from oppositional grouplets (Sikazwe 1994c), but the weakness and lack of leverage of those constellations was so glaring that rather than to serve as a source of support, any affiliation – even by association – was deemed to constitute a liability rather than an asset, and was rejected by CETU's leadership. That, of course, is not to say that there were no individual labour representatives that came to join these groups – just as some would join the ruling party – nor to ignore that the government would seize on any perceived convergence between the labour movement and opposition parties to allege that the former was being manipulated by the latter. Any real support from these groups, however, was neither plausible nor, in any meaningful way, forthcoming. Moreover, the CETU leaders were informed by what they considered the pitfalls of the past – excessive proximity to political parties – and jealously guarded what autonomy they had. In the words of Federation President Hailu Ourgessa (2017, personal interview), CETU 'fought back' when opposition parties tried to 'hijack' the struggle over the labour movement by calling a demonstration against government attacks on it. Autonomy was considered a virtue and a strength that was dependent on organisational detachment[205], but as the discussion above indicates this can also come to constitute a weakness.

When the eventual assault on the labour movement began in earnest, little resistance was offered. It is likely that the isolated and vulnerable strategic position the movement occupied contributed to the cautiousness and restraint exhibited by the leadership – including the absence of any serious attempt to launch a general strike. CETU President Dawey (2015, personal interview) has claimed that the Supreme Council decided to prepare for a general strike by gathering the required number of representatives' signatures. In Dawey's estimation, they would 'without a doubt' have acquired a sufficient number of signatures to hold a legal strike, had the movement not fallen victim to repression. 'I had been agitating workers to that effect', Dawey (2015, personal interview) has affirmed: 'I sent messengers to every direction to collect [the signatures required]'. However, several of the messengers were arrested. The legal path to a general strike was further narrowed with the ban on CETU. However unlikely the prospects were that the concerned judicial institutions would have permitted it, Dawey confirmed that that the option of calling an extra-legal general strike was never seriously entertained.

[205] There were common initiatives with the ETA, but nothing that moved much beyond issuance of joint press communiques.

But although the leadership declined to increase the stakes by calling a general strike, this was not agreeable to all parts of the movement. One prominent CETU leader testifies that quite a number of workers and workers' representatives ‘came to [CETU], asking us to call a strike’ and that the CETU leaders ‘were receiving pressures from every direction that we have to call a strike’. This included the expressed willingness of several unions to call out its members. The government too, he assesses, were weary – ‘terrorised’ in fact – by the prospect of a general strike. This expressed itself in repeated warnings and threats ‘telling us we really should not do that, that it will be the end of it’. But in any event, the decisions in the end came down to the leadership. ‘On our part’, he recognises ‘we were not ready to call a general strike, because we had just been in office for few months [and] we had not even finished going to the basic trade unions to introduce ourselves when the government started attacking us’ (Hailu 2017, personal interview).

In other words, despite the fact that the confrontation played out at the level of high officialdom, the pressure to take an assertive stand originated from the rank-and file-and the basic unions. While the pleas for a general strike came from the lower levels, reluctance prevailed at the top. This dynamic expressed itself much before outright suppression began. The CETU president, for example, affirms that the decision to call the fateful press conference that triggered the split and the showdown with the government was precipitated by ‘pressure’ not only from the government, but also ‘from below’, within the movement (Dawey 1994b). ‘There was a turmoil going on’, Federation President Hailu Ourgessa (2017 personal interview) has stated:

> *Right after the election [of CETU's leadership] people were coming to the national [centre]. They did not go right away and strike. They came and asked, ‘this is happening to us, what shall we do’? They were ready. Some [workers' representatives] even asked their workers already to come out [on strike]. But at the national level what was being said was, ‘strike is the ultimate thing that we should do – we have to refrain from going on a strike before we organise CETU properly’.*

These pressures gathered further pace as the effects of structural adjustment policies started biting (Hailu 2017, personal interview):

> *[Workers' representatives] were coming to the national [centre]. Even those that were not retrenched. Those who had heard that the government was going to close their factory. They were coming to [CETU's] office, to Dawey's office, from everywhere. Workers were ready to go for a strike. We are the ones who are to be blamed, we are the ones who said ‘do not do it’. We were not strong enough to go in that direction. That [would] be a twenty-four hours matter for the government*

> *to close everything and stop everything and force us to work from zero… Workers were coming to the office and asking us what we were doing. Some were asking to go for a general strike. Some were going for a demonstration. We discussed and what we said was, 'look, let us stay our ground – what we should do is to make it public that we oppose what the government is doing'.*

Pressure from the rank-and-file did not end with the coming of the conflict. While it has been claimed that, once the repression under way, workers 'mounted a very, very determined resistance to keep their local trade unions' (Hailu 2017, personal interview), this was never given a coordinated and organised outlet. Rather, workers were left to fend for themselves in dispersed local struggles where the balance of forces were tilted decisively against them. In the majority of cases, this bred resignation, defeat and eventual surrender to imposed trade union structures, employers and management.

In its active phase, the labour movement autonomously reproduced networks and informal mechanisms, much as it had done in the previous cycle. The networks which the early re-emergent movement created displayed similarities to those networks that emerged before 1963; those of the labour opposition of the late 1960s and early 1970s; and those that emerged again, after the repression of CELU from 1975 onwards. However, the emergence of networks during the second cycle has – unlike during the first cycle – been explained in terms of a largely spontaneous process. Their emergence around the industrial belt stretching southwards from Addis Ababa was facilitated by the density of workplaces and workers in the area (Hailu 2017, personal interview):

> *This is what we know about the labor movement in Ethiopia: we touch each other on a daily basis, informally. If you go to Akaki — it's a labour area — and you talk something to someone, during the night they go to the local pub and inns, and chat and discuss about this informally. Everybody gets the information. You will touch, in Akaki, in a day, 200-300 different unions. From there, it will travel in every direction. And the concentration of factories and enterprises in and around Addis Ababa, near Akaki and Wonji, also helped the dissemination of information quickly. I think the clandestine movement we were part of before the formation of the trade union, which was informal with no structure, exchanging information here and there, helped a lot.*

However, the spontaneity of these networks and their failure to crystallise into organisational structures contributed to the movement's failure to exhibit the same kind of tenacity and dynamism as it had in the 1960s and 1970s. The absence of central coordination atomised resistance once the formal institutions of CETU had been rendered defunct, and thus facilitated the relative simplicity by which control was eventually reasserted over the movement. Despite this, the networks

constituted a valuable resource by which efforts could be coordinated in the emergent phase of the movement.

But the state too was organising clandestine networks, and it was intervening in the affairs of the movement long before it had developed a determination to suppress it. Much like in previous decades, this did not immediately generate the outcomes intended. Instead, government high-handedness created resentment and determination among the workers. This is how the process has been described (Hailu 2017, personal interview) [abridged]:

> *The agenda that the government pushed on labour united labour itself. They went from union to union with the same agenda. Every union was angered, every union was against this. We did not want [a dependent confederation]. The previous trade union of the Derg – we hated it. It was not a trade union. Did we want to have the same thing again? That was the issue. We did not want to politicise anything. But if asking for [labour rights] is politics, we could not help it – we were politicians. But we had not intended in any way to take a political line. What we had done was to protect our interests as workers. We didn't want to have a party-controlled trade union. That was basic. That was the thing that united us. We have repeated this many times to them: 'Look, we had a labor union under Haile Selassie and immediately when Derg came they destroyed it and they put their trade union. You came in and you destroyed what Derg put in. And now you are trying to put your trade union. No, we want our trade union and not yours. And it is only when we have our trade union that it will last long; that it will not be required to be disbanded each time the government is changed. We want our trade union, controlled by us, working for us and whichever fate it has, that fate should be decided by the workers – not by you'.*

State intervention, then, again created its own counterforce in moving workers to resist and reinforcing their determination, initially becoming a factor conducive to the development of assertiveness rather than, as expected, a force that arrests it. As workers began to organise, moreover, state-aligned actors commenced on a process of restructuring, purging old officials and selecting new candidates, that was strikingly similar to the process that prepared the formation of AETU, even if accompanied by much lesser violence. Just like in the initial phases of the organisation of AETU, however, these aims proved elusive. The representatives elected by basic unions and the national leadership appointed by these representatives proved unwilling to submit and go against the most basic interests of the workers: to retain their jobs and pay. This again illustrates how motion is propelled by activities from below. It reflects the enduring logic that drives repeated organisational attempts among Ethiopian workers, and the establishment of the vehicle through which collective leverage can be asserted in the first place.

Another curious factor that needs to be taken under consideration, with regards to the second cycle as much as the first, is the degree to which white-collar workers were at the forefront of organisational efforts and industrial action. Two early and telling examples are the strikes called by CBE and EAL workers. During the height of the conflict, the unique resilience of unions within the banking and insurance sector and the federation of these unions has been noted. In more recent times, workers of the Hilton and Sheraton hotels in Addis Ababa protesting labour conditions have reinforced this point. Again, skilled workers have been a source of militant energies. But much like in the first cycle, this is not to detract from the importance of the blue-collar labour force[206] or to imply a division of the workforce on the question of orientation. Rather, it is probably reasonable, as Killion's (1985) argued, to assume that an enhanced capability to engage in open protest of skilled categories is linked to a comparatively advantageous position on the labour market. Geographically, moreover, workers in and around Addis Ababa have continued to supply the labour movement with some of its most militant constituencies. In addition to the relatively higher concentration of skilled workers, this is probably related to the critical mass of workers located in and around the capital, where strikers and protesters are not as exposed and vulnerable to harassment as in smaller towns, and where the conditions for social contagion are conducive.

It may be concluded from the above that a number of factors impinged on the orientation of the Ethiopian labour movement during the second cycle to different degrees, with none of them being determinant on its own. But returning to the variable identified as the demonstrative/inspirational factor, it is again notable that in this second cycle, while there was resistance, there were no significant victories. The second cycle was always a rear-guard attempt to establish defensive barriers, and very few of those barriers held when facing stress. The strikes that were called, important as they were, tended to end in few concessions from employers. Moreover, there was only limited initial progress – in terms of acquiring organisational autonomy – which was reversed relatively expediently. But most importantly, perhaps, there were no readily identifiable betterments for the rank-and-file, or any major concessions extracted from employers or the state. Rather, Ethiopian wage workers saw their conditions and position progressively deteriorate. The inspirational/demonstrative achievements that characterised the upturn of the first cycle must therefore be considered largely absent in the second. In that context, path dependency could only,

[206] To be sure, two of most recent large strikes, at the time of writing, have been held by plantation workers.

at best, mean stagnation and inactivity. At worst, it bred retreat and resignation. Particularly since the rank-and-file was never called upon, nor given an outlet for its energies.

It is not known, a journalist (Tameness 1994:1) reporting in the mid-1990s wrote ‘why the government has been so determined to oust a popularly elected leader’. But determined it was. And it is probably not too far-fetched to assume that it was related to the potentials of an autonomous labour movement. Not, perhaps, only, as Tamene would speculate, ‘for it to become a conduit for opposition groups’, but also for it to become a conduit and vehicle for the defence of the interests of workers at a time where low wages and retrenchments were essential aspects of implementing IMF-backed programmes, and, in light of the reorientation of the economy, of enhancing the rate of profit so as to attract greater investments. This is a proposition that requires more investigation into issues such as the long-term trajectory of wages, which is addressed in the following chapter.

6. Wages and unrest

In this chapter, the aim is to scrutinise the impact of the labour movement on the position of labour, and vice versa, by examining shifting levels of unrest and the movement of real wages[207] over the past six decades. The first section of the chapter examines aggregate levels of unrest in the waged sectors, while the second section does the same for the movement of real wages. The two consecutive sections consists of case studies on unrest and wage movements as derived directly from personnel files of two large Ethiopian workplaces: the Bahir Dar Textile Factory and the Dire Dawa railway depot. The purpose of reviewing the case studies is to test the degree to which the central statistical data corresponds to facts on the shop floor, to disaggregate the data looking for patterns that are hidden in the national statistics, and to allow for the impact of local dynamics on general patterns. In the final section, the findings derived from the aggregate data and the case studies are summarised.

6.1 Shifting levels of unrest

No continuous statistics exist over incidents of unrest or strikes in Ethiopia. Neither are such incidents compiled in any existent archival register. Partly, this is a result of the fact that due to the legal obstacles maintained in all consecutive Ethiopian labour legislations, no strike has ever been considered legal by pertinent authorities. It appears, moreover, that no comprehensive measurement of the occurrence of labour disputes or compilation of archived court documents of such disputes exists[208]. The probable reasons for this include the shifting responsibility for handling labour disputes between different bodies over the years, most of which – conciliation committees, labour relations boards, labour courts etc. – have been dissolved over the years; and the poor state of the archives of MoLSA, which appear to have been culled in the early 1980s. Whatever the cause, the paucity of comprehensive data and statistics has made a somewhat unconventional approach necessary. Relying on numerous sources of scattered data and references, an attempt is made to reconstruct the outlines of a general periodisation of shifting levels of intensity of unrest. This entails three different aspects. First, each strike incident[209] that has been

[207] Nominal wages adjusted for inflation.
[208] The exception are labour disputes in Addis Ababa, which, since the last decade or so, seems to have been compiled in one registry. However, for this inquiry little benefit can be derived from such a short and recent series.
[209] This is taken to mean incidences in which a number of employees, sufficient in number to disrupt regular operations of the workplace, have withheld labour, by not showing up to work, by laying down tools, or by walking out of work.

reported and found in the literature, in official and unofficial reports, in archives and correspondence of labour and state officials, and in major newspapers and journals[210] is compiled. Secondly, portrayals of the shifting general trends and levels of industrial conflict in the literature are reviewed. Finally, what limited data and short statistical time series that exist – such as mentions of short-term trends in industrial disputes – is presented to augment the above. Combined, this allows for a schematic periodisation of shifting levels of unrest over the last half-century. While the data presented here is not to be taken as conclusive and exhaustive, it is argued that it captures, broadly, and gives an indication of trends and divergences in aggregate levels of unrest. The validity of this is moreover tested against the workplace case studies – from where complete and undistorted data has been harvested.

The table below presents the strike incidents reported.

Table: Reported strike incidents in post-liberation Ethiopia[211]

Year	Number of major incidents	Workplaces affected and sources
1941		
1942	1	CFE (Killion 1984: 259)
1943		
1944		
1945		
1946	1	CFE (Killion 1984: 399)
1947	1	CFE (Killion 1984: 400-401)
1948		
1949	1	CFE (Killion 1984: 409-410)
1950		
1951		
1952	1	CFE (Syoum 2005:28)

'Invisible' forms of protest and resistance, individual disputes, or disputes channelled through the conciliation committees, courts etc., when not having led to collective action, are thus not measured here. The reason is that 'invisible' forms seldomly generate documentation beyond the workplace archive. Only strikes where the workplace or sector, and year of occurrence – in Gregorian and Ethiopian calendar – has been established are listed, except for in the case of general strikes.

[210] Newspapers in Ethiopia constitutes a very incomplete source when it comes to measuring strikes. Long periods of heavy censorship has meant that only for relatively short periods have they been able to report on strike action. For this reason, relying on newspapers alone would generate a much skewed representation of shifting levels of unrest, and so, this type of source can only constitute a complimentary source to the others mentioned.

[211] For the years 1953-1990 the chart includes strikes that took place in Eritrea, which was then federated with/incorporated into Ethiopia. While this period began in 1952 and ended in 1991, those two years are not included, since for the larger part of the years Eritrea was not administered as a part of Ethiopia

1953		
1954	3	HVA Wonji; CFE; Dockworkers in Massawa and Assab (Bahru 2008; Killion 1984: 422)
1955		
1956		
1957		
1958	2	Ethiopian Airlines; General strike in Eritrea (Bekele 1998; Killion 1984: 377-379)
1959	1	Darmar shoe factory (Beyene 2010: 45)
1960	1	Sava glass factory (Syoum 2005: 28)
1961	3	HVA Wonji-Shoa; Indo-Ethiopian textile factory; Darmar shoe factory; (Killion 1984: 438, 447)
1962	5	Bole International Airport; construction workers; Highway Authority; Heavy freight transport enterprise; taxis (Zack 1967; Stutz 1967: 37; Killion 1984: 383; Beyene 2010: 50-51)
1963		
1964	3	Ethiopian Airlines; Dire Dawa cotton factory; Eritrean railway workers (FEF 1964; Killion 1984: 507; Goitom 1985)
1965	2	HVA Wonji; General Ethiopia Transport (Killion 1984: 496; Bahru 2008; Prakken 1966)
1966	3	Berhanena Selam Printing Press; Debre Berhan Wool factory; HVA Wonji-Shoa (Beyene 2010: 103; Prakken 1966)
1967	4	HVA Wonji-Shoa; Several strikes at the Bahir Dar textile factory; Leather Factory (Killion 1984: 522-523; FEE n.d.)
1968	2	Several strikes and slow-downs at Dire Dawa cotton factory (Killion 1984: 508, 657)
1969	2	HVA Wonji-Shoa; HVA Metahara (Killion 1984: 524-525)
1970	1	Assab oil refinery (Beyene 2010: 106-108)
1971	2	Diabaco textile factory; Assab Port (Addis Zemen 1971b; Beyene 2010: 106; Bondestam 1975: 547)
1972	1	Abader Farm (CELU 'Confidential Data: Summary of Unions', 1973)
1973	7	CBE; Nurahera and Melka Sedi plantations; Diabaco; Central Printing Press; 'a number of strikes by… "white-collar" workers in the parastatal companies' of Addis Ababa; 'many strikes' in HVA Wonji-Shoa and Metahara (Seleshi 1979: 698; Beyene 2010; Killion 527, 537, 548)
1974	25	General Strike; Humera plantations; Imperial Ethiopian Tobacco Monopoly workers; teachers; haricot bean farms; import-export firms; Civil Aviation; Elementary School Building Unit; Addis Ababa Municipality ; Ministry of Finance; dairy industry ; CFE, Anbessa bus firm; General Ethiopian Transport Company; Addis Ababa Dairy Industry; Eritrean hospitals; Garment Manufacturing; taxis; Haile Selassie I University staff; Postal service; truck drivers; and telecommunications; (See chapter 4)

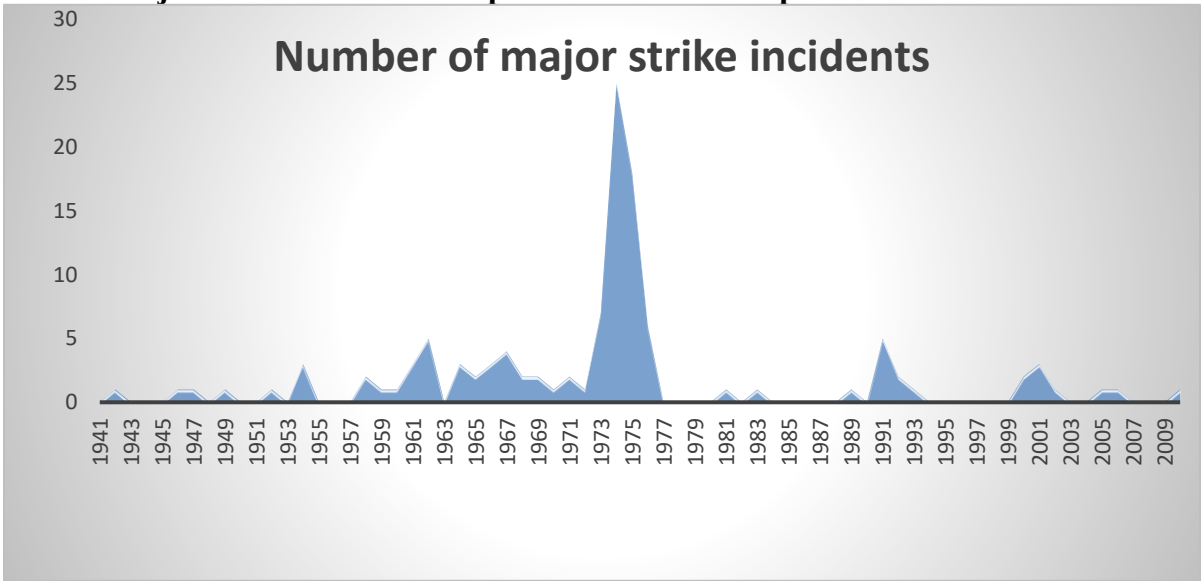
1975	18	Moenco; Crown Cork; Sabean Metals; Darmar Shoes; Ethiopian Airlines; Berhanena Selam Printing Press; Addis Tyre Company; Addis Shoe Factory; Fiat Company; Lazaridis Company; grain storage depot; Ethiopian Cider; Cement factory; Sadaolin Paints; Vaskin Company; Petroleum workers; Banks; Insurance companies (see chapter 4)
1976	6	Addis Ababa power and water utility; Banks; Addis Ababa transport sector; Tobacco Monopoly; two national textile factories (see chapter 4)
1977		
1978		
1979		
1980		
1981	1	Elaberet plantation (Eritrea information 1981: 14)
1982		
1983	1	Barattolo/Asmara textile factory (Goitom 1985)
1984		
1985		
1986		
1987		
1988		
1989	1	National Textile Corporation (ETU 1989)
1990		
1991	5	Gold mines; Akaki and Kaliti Animal Fodder Factory; Ethiopian Freight Transport Corporation; printing press workers; CBE (*EH* 1991a; 1991c; 1991d; 1991e)
1992	2	Ethiopian Airlines; Akaki textile factory [possibly in 1993] (DoS 1993: 91; Dawey 2015, personal interview)
1993	1	Ethiopian Electric Power Authority [possibly in 1992] (Dawey 2015, personal interview)
1994		
1995		
1996		
1997		
1998		
1999		
2000	2	Construction workers; Ethiopian Airlines mechanics (DoS 2001)
2001	3	MIDROC Construction Ethiopia; Gilgil Gibe Hydroelectric Plant [both possibly in 2000]; Ring Road construction workers (John W 2001; DoS 2002)
2002	1	Road construction crews (DoS 2003)
2003		
2004		
2005	1	Dragados road construction (DoS 2006)
2006	1	Road construction workers (DoS 2007)
2007		

2008		
2009		
2010	1	Roto PLC (DoS 2011)

Source: Author's compilation

A number of things ought to be pointed out about the reliability and representativeness of the data presented above. To begin with, the list is not conclusive, and it can probably be assumed that a good number of cases have not been reported in such a manner as for it to be included in the table – even if the most serious incidents in terms of the numbers of strikers, the longevity of strikes, and the political-economic disruption they have caused are likely included. Much like Silver (2006: 37) stated, rather than attempting to 'produce a count of *all or even most* incidents of labour unrest… the procedure is intended to produce a measure that reliably indicates *the changing levels* of labour unrest – when the incidence of labour unrest is rising or falling, when it is high or low – *relative to* other points in time'. Moreover, the magnitude of the incidents differs from case to case, with a time-trend discernible. The 1981 strike of plantation workers in Eritrea – a minor one by all accounts – was only reported by a publication issued by a group solidarising with the insurgent movement in the region. The 1973 bank strike, on the other hand, was reported widely and has generated plenty of documentation. While it can safely be ascertained that the latter constituted a consequential event, it is difficult to ascertain the same with regards to the former. Moreover, the coverage of sources differ over time. Detailed descriptions of strikes by DoS began only in 1992. Press freedom to report, meanwhile, was relatively greater in the periods of 1974-76 and from 1991 onwards, albeit never absolute. The emergence of a private press after 1991 adds to the potential sources. One should in other words expect somewhat of a relative overrepresentation of incidents reported for the years 1974-76, and from 1991 onwards, when detailed attention was more frequently forthcoming, the diversity of sources was greater, and when censorship was comparatively lesser. Correspondingly, the number of strikers were generally higher in cases reported in earlier periods as well as in the early 1990s, indicating that a greater impact was required for the incidents to be registered and/or that strike incidents were generally more severe and involved more workers. These caveats notwithstanding, a number of things stand out from the compiled data, which is illustrated in the chart below.

Chart: Major strike incidents in post-liberation Ethiopia encountered in the literature



Source: Author's compilation

The first and most obvious observation is that, even if only the tip of an iceberg is captured[212], it can be established that between 1973 and 1976 an unprecedented upshot in strike activity took place – a so-called proletarian insurgency. While this much has been made clear in the literature, it has often been interpreted as an outcome of the revolution. In this context it is noteworthy that the upsurge in activity preceded the 1974 revolution – rapidly increasing strike action evidently began the year before the popular unrest, that eventually resulted in the revolution, broke out – putting into serious question the standard interpretation of cause and effect between labour unrest and the revolution. Secondly, it is notable that the years around the formation of CELU seem to have witnessed a pronounced increase of unrest, and that the full decade-and-half of the 1960s and early 1970s were marked by a consistent prevalence of mobilisation and unrest. This is particularly conspicuous when compared to the 1940s, the 1950s, and the post-1977 periods. However, from a tranquil paucity, there are brief episodes of activity registered between 1989 and 1993 and again around the year 2000. Again, it needs to be noted that the strike action that took place in the 1960s and 1970s registered here was generally on a significantly larger scale than in the 1980s. Moreover,

[212] The degree of omission is probably the greatest for the years around 1974, when, on the one hand, industrial peace broke down to a level where not all incidents could plausibly be covered, and where other paramount events distracted attention and ability to report. Indeed, it is probable that while in 1974 several hundred workplaces were affected, the 1975 and 1976 strikes also saw strikes in hundreds of workplaces. Again, and for similar reasons, there appears to be a relatively high degree of omission in the early 1990s, where references to general levels of unrest do not tally with the specific incidences reported.

while unrest during the 1989-93 period has been described in the literature and involved thousands of workers, there are few sources discussing the incidents in the 2000s and there are no figures on the number of strikers or the longevity of the strikes, except qualifications in, for example the DoS reports, of the 'minor' scale of incidents. In other words, it is evident that the activity registered in the 2000s was of a significantly lesser magnitude than in the 1990s – let alone the 1960s and 1970s.

But it is not only in terms of intensity, measured in the number of strikes or strikers, that the period of the 1960s and early 1970s stands out. The magnitude and seriousness of the unrest taking place in those decades also manifested itself in terms of the practices that accompanied the strikes. A number of examples from Killion's research illustrates the point. At the Bahir Dar Textile Factory, unrest in the year 1967 alone included repeated strikes and the setting on fire of parts of the factory and warehouses (Killion 1984: 512). At the Dire Dawa Cotton Factory, meanwhile, serious problems developed between the union and management, leading to the personnel manager being attacked and 'severely beaten' by assailants, before the state intervened and imprisoned the union chairman (Killion 1984: 506-507). At the HVA plantations and factories, repeated unrest was reported through the 1960s, and strikes were accompanied by episodes of sabotage. 'Wonji has had series and series of strikes' Mesfin Gebremichael (1983, interview with Tom Killion) has stated – 'if it was not in the plantation it was in the factory, if it was not in the factory it was in the plantation'. The manner in which unrest was climaxing in the period leading up to the revolution has been noted by HVA labour leader Elias Mengesha, who stated that particularly the two last months of 1973 saw a remarkable number of strikes at the Wonji and Metahara sites (Killion 1973:527). Throughout the wage working sector, similar reports lends credence to the impression that unrest was not just extensive, intensive and reoccurring, but also very serious, and steadily escalating.

In order to thoroughly evaluate what has been described in the above, however, references to general levels of strike activity – as opposed to date- and place-specific incidents – need also to be taken into account. Here, the literature seems to broadly confirm the picture of shifting unrest levels outlined in the above. A number of unspecific references to unrest underlines this impression. Syoum (2005: 28) spoke of 'wildcat strikes in many industries around 1960'. In 1962, meanwhile, the Ethiopian assistant foreign minister Getachew Makasha told a visiting ICFTU representative (Claverie 1962b) that some of the unions had 'started creating trouble with

employers', including staging 'two strikes in the shoe industry and in the textiles'. Other senior officials informed the same source about a number of 'concerning' strikes and 'growing agitations among the workers, who had staged several down-tools and walk-out actions recently'. In the following years, Markakis and Nega have written (1978: 58), 'strikes were plenty'. Suter (1966: 37), meanwhile, has written about 'reports of numerous strikes since the legalisation of labour unions', with Ethiopian Airlines and Indo-Ethiopian Textile workers having 'conducted several work-stoppages over prolonged periods'. By 1966, the FEE President Prakken was growing exasperated. Citing 'an increasing tendency of labour difficulties in many enterprises', where 'in most instances normal grievance procedures, as stipulated in the law as well as in collective agreements, were not observed', he called on the government to exercise stricter control over the unions, and 'to eliminate labour unrest and restore order and respect for the law'. 'Violation of the law by workers and unions, as is a common feature now', he claimed, not only risked jeopardising the economy, but could lead to 'uncontrollable violence' (Prakken 1966). Yet by 1973 industrial conflict did not appear to have subsided. That year, Prakken's successor as FEE president, Bekele Beshah (1973), spoke of a 'spat of illegal strikes', including at least three in 'very important establishments', and opined that 'industrial relations developments in Ethiopia seems to have taken a turn for the worse'.

Unrest continued unabated through the early years of the revolution. In 1976 a senior POMOA official claimed that production was 'seriously hampered by slowdowns, attempted strikes, and other forms of sabotage' (Senay 1976: 18-19). The PMAC chairman was later to confirm the prevalence of widespread labour unrest during the early years of the revolution (Mengistu 1982), and two prominent economist (Mulatu and Yohannis 1988: 105) claimed that such unrest and disruption was equally important in explaining the poor performance of the early post-revolutionary economy as 'shortages, war and civil strife'. But after this period of intense strike activity, and outside a few years from around 1989 to 1994, references to unrest are glaringly few. The emergence of renewed stirrings and unrest in the waning years of the WPE has been discussed in the previous chapter, and included the process Beyene (2012) labelled an 'uprising' in the industrial corridor leading south from Addis Ababa. It also included the unrest of the early EPRDF years, and most prominently the modest but substantive strike wave between 1991 and 1993. Despite the availability of detailed annual DoS reports for subsequent years only a few odd and lesser cases are registered after this period. For most of the post-1994 years it is either explicitly

stated that no strikes took place, or only 'minor' ones did. Moreover, for the post-1977 WPE/PMAC period, the press of the political opposition has been examined to find evidence of officially unreported unrest, with only a couple of minor cases reported[213]. All of the above supports a periodisation of shifting labour unrest that tallies rather well with the data presented in the above.

Unfortunately, only fragments of statistical data covering the trends discussed here exist. Strikes, as mentioned, has never been measured in a systematic manner, and labour disputes have been measured over only a few brief moments. Moreover, the measurements do not lend themselves to long-term comparison, as the laws and institutions tasked with handling labour disputes changed frequently. This having been stated, a few short time series of registered labour disputes, which shed light on some key conjunctures, are available. Stutz (1967: 90-91), for example, identifies an upward trajectory of labour disputes in the 1960s. Individual labour disputes registered in all instances grew from 137 in 1963; 468 in 1964; to 776 in 1965. Meanwhile, cases involving trade unions increased from 11 to 70, and disputes handled by the LRB grew from 31 to 161 between 1962/63 and 65/66 (Stutz 1967: 95). MoLSA's *Labour Statistics Bulletin* – a one-off publication that was immediately discontinued – of 1979, meanwhile, testifies to the sharp effects of the militarisation of the workplace struggles in 1977/78 – a period which saw the most intense violence. Between the year 1976/77 and 1977/78, the number of new labour disputes registered declined from 27 700 to 12 000[214] (MoLSA 1979: 17). A final conjuncture for which statistical time series data exist is the time for the implementation of the 1982 trade union act. During the year it was proclaimed – 1982/83 – labour disputes registered in Addis Ababa lower courts numbered 2 300 (MoLSA 1987: app. 1: 5). By 1985/86 this number had been reduced to 1 150, indicating that registered disputes had halved in the three years since the legislation that turned trade unions into formal WPE instruments had been enacted (MoLSA 1987: app. 1: 5). The comparable 1978/79 figure of labour disputes registered at the Addis Ababa MoLSA branch office, meanwhile, had been a full 5 900 (MoLSA 1979: 19). While it is improbable that all those cases

[213] These source include, for example, the EPRP's publication *Democracia*, MEISON's *New Ethiopia*, TPLF's *People's Voice*, EPRDF's *EPRDF Bulletin*, and a number of EPLF publications, including *Vanguard*.

[214] The subsequent year – 1978/79, which was the last one covered – saw a modest increase to 17 700, but this is not to be taken to mean that there was any real re-emergence of industrial conflict. Rather, as MoLSA (1979: 17) explained, this partial rebound was caused by an increase in the number of reporting branch offices that year. 'In general', the document states, 'labour disputes are reducing'.

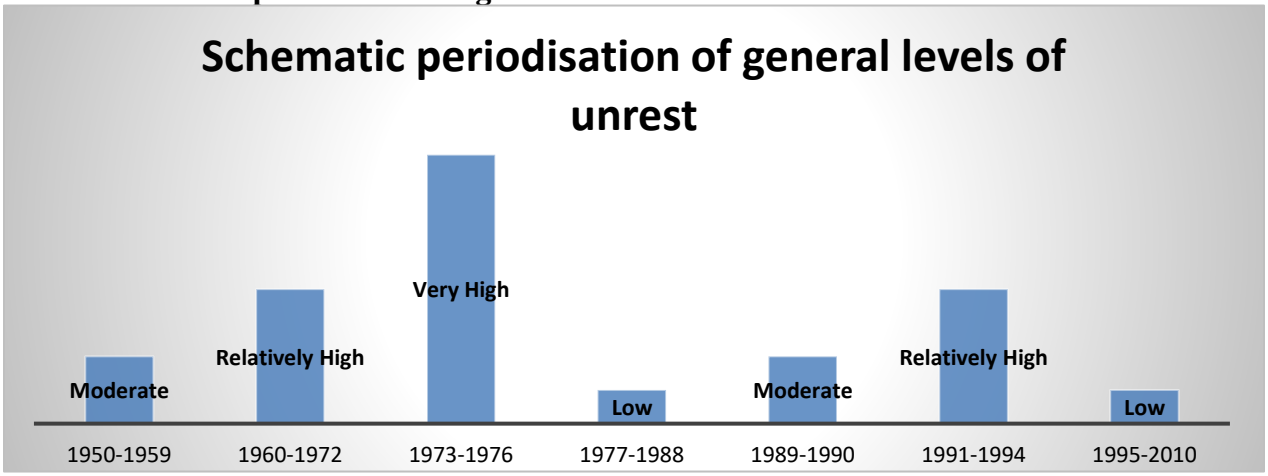
where registered in courts, the compiled numbers nevertheless imply the prevalence of a steady decline – underlined by sharp drops during key conjunctures – in the number of labour disputes registered throughout the period 1976-1986. However incomplete, then, the time series of statistical data are, what statistics exist seems to reinforce the trajectories outlined, through the 1960s to the 1980s at the very least.

Reports also lends credence to the reappearance of strike activity in the early 1990s. The DoS (1992: 130-131) Country Report on Human Rights Practices in 1991, for example, perceives a temporary official tolerance 'of strikes and protests in the workplace', which could only have been derived from the repeated appearance of such unrest. Moreover, in 1991, as has been noted, the prime minister of the TGE testified to the increasing level of workers' protest and strike activity, and in 1993 the Ethiopian labour scene was reported to have seen 'numerous actions' of retrenched workers (DoS 1994). By the mid-1990s, however, reports of unrest had become glaringly few, and have reappeared only in recent years. Blattman and Dercon (2016) mention four recent wildcat strikes on flower farms and in a shoe factory. October 2017 alone, moreover, saw major strikes at the Sher horticulture farm and the Castel Winery, which combined involved 5 200 workers; and a general strike threat – the first to be issued in over 40 years – by CETU (Fasika 2017b; Fasika 2017c; Addis Fortune 2017). Despite such recent activity – which may or may not herald the reappearance of a combative labour movement – the secular trend of labour unrest since the mid-1970s, and particularly the cyclical trend between the mid-1990s and 2010, has been one of declining levels.

From what has been discussed in the above, a schematic periodisation of shifting levels of unrest may now be attempted. Because of the relative incompleteness of data sources, this can only be taken to constitute an indicative and tentative illustration of such levels, and it has therefore also necessarily been cast in general terms. Moreover, it is subjected to the test of more concrete data from the workplace archives later in this chapter. All this having been said, this section has demonstrated that certain trends in the general levels of unrest over the last six decades or so can be identified. Even if the period 1973-1976 constitutes an outlier here, there is a clearly discernible arch of increasing unrest beginning in the late 1950s/early 1960s, intensifying through the 1960s and 1970s, and cresting in 1973-76. It has also been demonstrated that even if the 1990s saw the

re-emergence of a wave of unrest, it did not reach the same heights as the first. A schematic periodisation would therefore look something like the chart presented below.

Chart: Schematic periodisation of general levels of unrest 1950-2010



In addition to what has already been stated, it is notable that the periods of low unrest levels have coincided with periods when organised labour has been thoroughly co-opted and controlled, while the periods of moderate, relatively high and very high levels of unrest have coincided with the prevalence of either a decentralised but relatively autonomous labour movement without a national centre (before the formation of CELU and between 1991 and 1993); a centralised movement with a pragmatically or deferentially-oriented centre that enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy (in the early 1960s, 1970s and between 1993 and 1994); or (in the case of the 1973-1976 period) a labour movement with a radical and autonomous centre.

6.2 Movement of real wages

In order to measure the development of real wages for the corresponding period, longer time series of comparable data are fortunately available. In 1963 the CSA began to publish the annual *Statistical Abstract* in which manufacturing wages were measured, containing data going as far back as 1955. Eventually, the abstracts stopped including the figure for average pay per employee, but since this figure can be derived from dividing total wages and salaries paid by the total number of employees, it can still be calculated. In other words, this publication provides a source for calculating comprehensive time series of the average nominal wage paid to employees in Ethiopia's manufacturing sector since 1955.

A few things needs to be noted with regards to the time series data on manufacturing wages presented. First, the date is derived from the manufacturing sector alone. Since, however, this sector is entirely based on wage labour, and since this sector is the primary one in which unionisation has been permitted throughout the time period concerned, this is deemed appropriate for the inquiry. In other sectors dependent on wage labour, such as that of the civil service or agricultural day labourers, unionisation and collective bargaining has, for large parts of the period, not been permitted. It would thus be more difficult to measure the impact of these factors on wages in these sectors. Secondly, while nominal wage data is available going back to 1955, systematic price index data – which is required to deflate nominal wages and calculate the value of real wages – is only available from 1963 onwards. It may be noted that between 1955 and 1963, nominal wages grew only by a total of 7.5 percent, which seems to indicate a very low or even negative real wage development if later inflationary trends prevailed, but in lieu of price index data, this cannot be concluded with any level of certainty. From 1963 onwards, price index data from Addis Ababa is available, and the deflated real wage can therefore be calculated by dividing the nominal wage with the price index. The fact that it is Addis Ababa's price index data that is used, despite the fact that much of the waged workforce was employed outside of the capital, requires a short justification. From a pragmatic point of view, price index data is only available for Addis Ababa for the greater part of this time series. But while this may lead to distortions in the short run – arising from, for example, fluctuating supply mismatches – prices in Addis Ababa can logically not move too far away from those in other urban centres over a longer period. Moreover, for the period that alternative data is available – between 1999/2000 and 2010 – the accumulative national rate of inflation has been slightly higher than the rate in Addis Ababa. In other words, using the national inflation rate would have reduced calculated real wages since the year 2000 even further. Finally, it needs to be noted that the CSA has reset the baseline year of the price index a number of times over the period of this inquiry. Whenever this is the case, the new base year's 1963 index has been multiplied with the consecutive year's index in order to reach a computed index number that retains 1963 as the baseline year. A chart of deflated real wages in the manufacturing sector, taking these points into consideration would thus look as follows.

Table: Deflated Real Wages 1963-2010

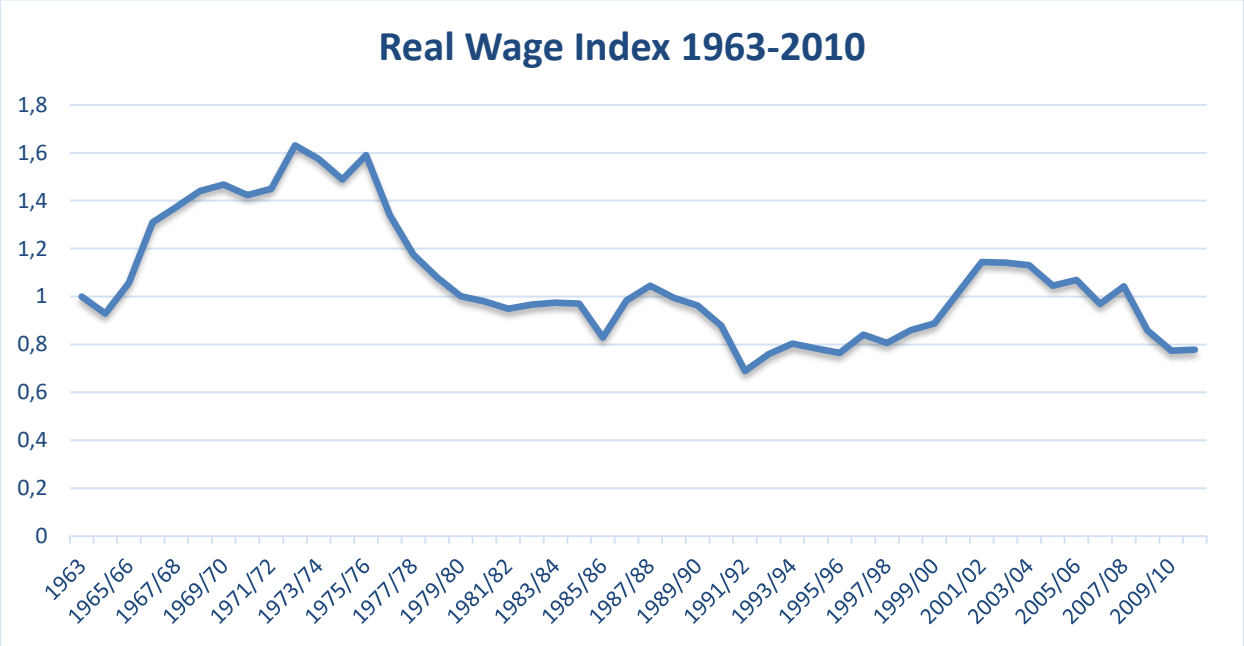
Year	Nominal average yearly wage	Computed Price Index 1963	Deflated wage = Nominal wage/inflation	Real wage index
1963	663.4778722	1	663.4778722	1
1964/65	690.4387894	1.12[215]	616.4632048	0.929139058
1965/66	877.9967471	1.252	701.2753571	1.05696872
1966/67	1102.347291	1.268	869.3590622	1.310306038
1967/68	1164.968584	1.278	911.5560122	1.373905673
1968/69	1223.680318	1.28	956.0002483	1.440892437
1969/70	1264.216919	1.298	973.9729732	1.467981095
1970/71	1350.081414	1.43	944.1128771	1.422975681
1971/72	1381.965153	1.437	961.7015679	1.449485519
1972/73	1460.943486	1.35	1082.18036	1.631072271
1973/74	1535.136078	1.47	1044.310257	1.573994102
1974/75	1577.26788	1.597	987.6442578	1.488586582
1975/76	1795.532066	1.701	1055.574407	1.590971532
1976/77	1944.727238	2.187	889.2214165	1.340242763
1977/78	1988.657414	2.551	779.5599429	1.174959973
1978/79	2088.333735	2.916	716.1638323	1.079408768
1979/80	2234.09171	3.364	664.1176308	1.00096425
1980/81	2297.707704	3.535	649.988035	0.979667992
1981/82	2361.827471	3.752	629.4849336	0.948765528
1982/83	2540.40083	3.961	641.3534032	0.966653795
1983/84	2550.199505	3.945	646.4384043	0.974317956
1984/85	2754.295572	4.278	643.8278569	0.970383315
1985/86	2802.01442	5.094	550.0617236	0.829058129
1986/87	2998.221371	4.594	652.6385222	0.983662831
1987/88	3107.871454	4.483	693.2570721	1.044883486
1988/89	3166.098867	4.8	659.6039306	0.994161159
1989/90	3303.936683	5.176	638.3185245	0.962079598
1990/91	3171.559524	5.442	582.7930033	0.878391018
1991/92	3379.374183	7.387	457.4758607	0.689511859
1992/93	4112.935845	8.164	503.7892999	0.759315903
1993/94	4502.527495	8.453	532.6543825	0.802821623
1994/95	4725.7934	9.095	519.6034525	0.783151141
1995/96	5075.633892	10.007	507.2083434	0.764469117
1996/97	5301.033941	9.496	558.2386206	0.841382424
1997/98	5473.899331	10.237161	534.7087274	0.805917951
1998/99	5892.143467	10.327224	570.5447531	0.859930341
1999/00	6335.641741	10.757525	588.9497576	0.887670535
2000/01	7027.909961	10.42245	674.3049821	1.016318721
2001/02	7574.804353	9.97428465	759.4333447	1.144624978
2002/03	7907.761285	10.4432949	757.2094211	1.14127306
2003/04	8268.890977	11.0269521	749.8800123	1.130226107
2004/05	8201.145213	11.8190583	693.8915948	1.045839845
2005/06	9089.849589	12.80919105	709.6349452	1.069568368
2006/07	9776.953684	15.20635455	642.951843	0.969062979
2007/08	12730.40826	18.40708895	691.6035609	1.042391299
2008/09	13552.76686	23.81738274	569.028386	0.857644859
2009/10	13459.07308	26.20516604	513.6038086	0.774108422
2010/11	16160.78038	31.29809623	516.3502682	0.778247911

Source: CSA's annual *Statistical Abstract* 1963 to 2012/13.

[215] Owing to a lack of data for 1964/65, the inflation rate for this year alone is a proxy derived by calculting the mean value of the preceding and subsequent year.

The table above is illustrated in the following chart, where the shifting real wage index – meaning the shifting average real wage in the manufacturing sector – is depicted.

Chart: Deflated Real Wage Index 1963-2010



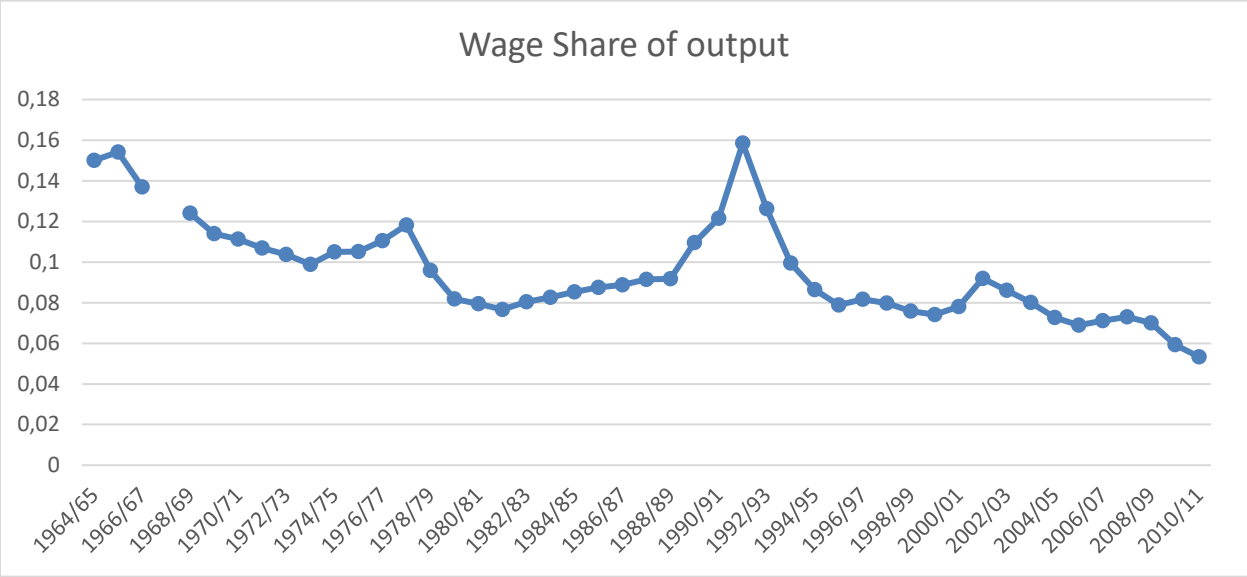
Source: CSA's annual *Statistical Abstract* 1963 to 2012/13.

A number of features stand out from the data presented in the above. To begin with, while the years between 1955 and 1964 seems to have seen a very slow wage growth, the pace picked up considerably in the mid-1960s. Most strikingly, real wages grew rapidly through the late 1960s and early 1970s so as to peak around the time of the revolution. But as much as the revolution coincided with the highest relative level of real wages recorded, and thus the crest of the arch, it also constituted the conjuncture in which the Ethiopian labour movement was thoroughly subjugated, and the point where a catastrophic collapse of real wages began. Through the second half of the 1970s they declined sharply. Since that point, two movements are apparent. The first is a renewed fall of wages to its lowest position – less than half of its 1975 levels – in the aftermath of, first, the adoption of a liberalisation programme by the WPE, and, subsequently, the seizure of state power and implementation of renewed liberalisation programmes by the EPRDF. Secondly, what appeared to be the beginning of a recovery of real wages around the millennium – coinciding with the beginning of the most recent phase of expansion of the Ethiopian economy – levelled out and dropped back again at the end of the decade. Real wages at the end of the first decade of the 21st century thus remained considerably lower than they were in 1963, and quite catastrophically

lower – still less than half – of what they were in the mid-1970s. In other words, despite economic conjunctures shifting, the collapse of wages that coincided with the defeat of the hitherto relatively autonomous labour movement has never been reversed, nor significantly ameliorated.

The disconnection between real wages and shifting economic conjunctures can be illustrated in other ways. If the data in the above pertains to what – following Marx's (1990) concepts of absolute and relative surpluses[216] – can be referred to as absolute exploitation, the concept of relative exploitation is derived from the degree to which increasing output is uncompensated for in wages. To be sure, the data presented above shows that absolute exploitation has increased in degree, but it is noteworthy that relative exploitation have done so at a significantly higher rate. By dividing the total amount of wages paid by the total value of output over the same years, the *wage share* is calculated. Its decline is illustrated in the below.

Chart: Wage share of total value of output 1964-2010



Source: CSA's annual *Statistical Abstract* 1963 to 2012/13.

Here the secular trend of decline is striking, with the wage share descending from over 15 percent in 1966 to just over 5 percent in the most recent year. The upward movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s can largely be attributed to the rising real wages achieved during that period. However, the spike of the wage share between 1988/89 and 1992/93, it needs to be noted, is a ruse. It is

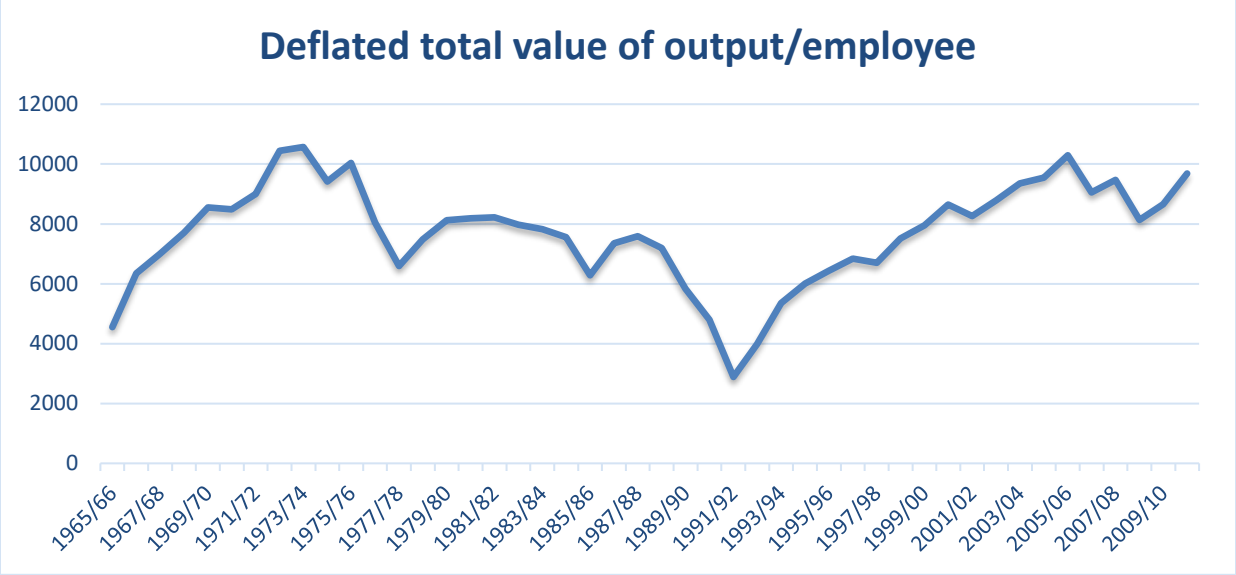
[216] The former referring to the manner in which surpluses are generated through manipulating the amount of worktime the worker is not compensated for, while the latter refers to surpluses generated as a result of increasing productivity of workers.

explained by a sharp but temporary drop in output that coincided with the acute phase of the Ethiopian civil war – where supply and distribution systems broke down, and an increasing number of industries found themselves cut off from the larger market – and the political reconfiguration that followed. What the graph illustrates is that while workers have lost around one-quarter of real wages since 1963, they have, over the same period of time, been deprived of almost two-thirds of the wage share they used to command.

Two factors, excluding that of workers' agency, that can be forwarded as alternative explanations for decreasing real wages require mention here. The first is inflation, and the second is productivity levels. Inflation has exercised recurrent pressure on real wages. However, to assign a determinant significance to this factor would be to exaggerate its role. While inflation generally – in any economy – is the instrument by which real wages are depressed, it cannot achieve this by itself. As has been demonstrated, high levels of inflation has been a constant feature of the Ethiopian economy over the past six decades, yet it has not always resulted in falling real wages. In the 1960s and early 1970s, nominal wage gains were more than sufficient to make up for this factor. It is only with the stagnation of nominal wages that this factor becomes important, and then only as an attendant factor.

Another factor that could, potentially, have explained the decline of real wages is productivity. It could, for example, have been suggested that the WPE's practice of ‘stuffing’ workplaces with relatively superfluous workers affected wages negatively. However, although ‘stuffing’ appears to have been practiced (Mulatu and Yohannis 1988: 105), this does not appear to explain the wage fall. On the one hand, and as already noted, the wage share – reflecting total wages as a share of output, and would thus be likely to grow when ‘stuffing’ is practiced – continued to decline. But moreover, if this was indeed a major problem effecting downward pressures on wages, one would expect to observe a declining value of output – calculated in ‘real’, deflated terms – per employee. As the chart below demonstrates, this was not the case.

Chart: Deflated value of output per employee 1965-2010



Source: CSA's annual *Statistical Abstract* 1963 to 2012/13[217].

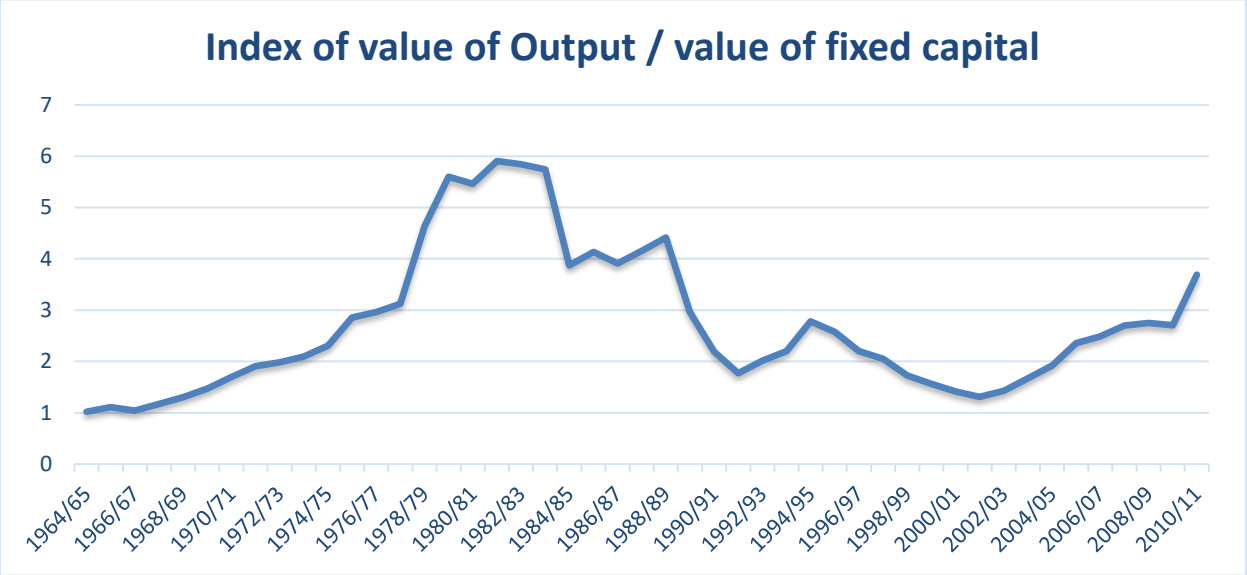
From the chart above it is apparent that while 'stuffing' may have led to a somewhat declining level of labour productivity in the late 1970s, this remained significantly higher than in the mid-1960s. The disrupting effect of the acute phase of the civil war is here expressed in an inverted order, by the sharp indention observable in the late 1980s/early 1990s. But this levelled out after a few years as the crisis receded. Moreover, while the most recent growth in productivity is evident, this does not appear to have resulted in any real wage gains. In other words, in Ethiopia real wages movements appear to have been largely decoupled from shifts in labour productivity. And since labour productivity has more than doubled since the 1960s, while real wages have fallen, the rate of exploitation[218] has risen sharply – much more so in recent years, in fact, than in 1983, when the ILO (1983: 15-16) warned that 'wages were lagging far behind productivity increases, revealing a rapidly increasing rate of exploitation'.

To this discussion, the question of the organic composition of capital[219] could be added. If labour productivity has been increasing, how is this reflected in its relation with the fixed component of capital and the productivity of the latter? The graph below illustrates the index of the value of output – which include wages – over the total value of fixed capital, where 1964/65 constitutes the baseline year. The effects of 'stuffing' on the organic composition of capital, and hence the

[217] The value for 1967/68 alone is a proxy.
[218] Measuring the ration between value of output/surpluses and wages.
[219] Which measures the ratio between the value of fixed capital and wages.

productivity of fixed capital, is observable in the bulge through the late 1970s and early 1980s. During these years the productivity of labour decreased while the productivity of capital increased, which is a logical outcome of 'stuffing'. It is only during the expansion of the 1960s and in the latest upturn, since 2002, that both factors' – labour and capital – productivity have increased. However, while the first episode of such joint growth in factor productivity concurred with or resulted in increasing real wages and an increasing wage share, the latest episode has not translated into wage gains – whether relative or absolute.

Chart: Indexed total value of output/total value of fixed capital 1964-2010



Source: CSA's annual *Statistical Abstract* 1963 to 2012/13[220].

One pertinent question is to what extent these figures tally with the representations found in the literature. As has been noted, the literature has generally, and quite sweepingly, represented real wages in imperial times as stagnant and poor: 'extremely meagre' according to Bekure (1984: 611); 'extremely low' in the words of Killion (1984: 429); or 'appealingly low' according to Lefort (1983: 26). This impression is put into serious question by the data presented in the above. Moreover, dispersed references to wages in specific workplaces and/or during specific conjunctures in the literature, when assembled into an aggregate description of trends in wage movements, lends support to the data presented.

[220] The value for 1967/68 alone is a proxy.

By the mid-1960s, Ginzberg and Smith (1967: 98) listed daily wages between 0.65-1.50 ETB in the industrial sector, reaching up to 200 ETB/month in the service sector, which seem to tally rather well with the CSA data presented. But collective agreements and conflict settlements arrived to at workplace after workplace cumulatively exercised an upward pressure on wage levels over the 1960s and early 1970s. A number of examples may serve to illustrate this. At the Dire Dawa Textile Factory workers' minimum daily wages were increased from 0.80 ETB to 1.25 ETB/day in 1963 alone, following an agreement between the newly established union and factory management (Killion 1984: 505-506), while at the HVA sugar factory in Wonji minimum daily wages had almost doubled, from 0.75 ETB to 1.30 ETB, between 1954 and 1964[221] – years of fierce contestation on the site (Bahru 2008: 134-136). The collective agreement struck in 1964 alone increased daily minimum wages from 1.10 to 1.30 ETB and reportedly added 70 percent to the wages of permanent employees (Bahru 2008: 136). In preparation of its third General Assembly, CELU celebrated some of its success in the preceding year: collective agreements at the St George Brewery and Ethio-Synthetic Textiles had led to wage increases of 5-11 percent, while the Chandris Meat Canning Factory in Dire Dawa had agreed to set a minimum daily pay at 1.35 ETB (CELU 1972). This was to be contrasted with the Diabaco cotton company, where the union had been severely harassed, its executive committee members fired, and no collective agreement had been signed. Here, it was reported that 'workers that have served for more than 15 years with the company, still now get 0.75 [ETB] a day' (CELU 1972). But individual employers could only resist the movement so far without risking serious disruption, and the wage movements in the economy at large testified to this trend. In the decade between 1964 and 1974, real manufacturing wages were found to have grown at an average annual rate of 7.4 percent (Mulatu 1990).

That employers were starting to feel the pinch of rising wages is a documented fact. Bekele Beshah, the president of the FEE, wrote a letter to the minister of national community development and social affairs[222] stating that 'wages and fringe benefits are becoming more and more excessive and are not reciprocated with a commensurate rise in productivity'. 'Such a tendency of spiralling wages and cost', he continued 'will, unless checked in time, damage the national economy [and]

[221] Note that these figures pertain to the factory workers. The casual cane cutters in the fields were paid significantly less, had weaker employment security, worse labour conditions, and were not permitted to organise.
[222] Reprinted in CELU (1972).

need in our view, countermeasures on a national scale'. Replying for CELU, Solomon Tekle Tsion did not attempt to refute the characterisation of wage developments as 'spiralling', but rather referred to the relatively small size of the workforce covered by collective agreements – 44 establishments employing 25 000 workers – compared to the size of the labour force and population of the country (CELU 1972). Nevertheless, the contending parties appear to have been in agreement that the trend of wage movements was one of rapid increase. This included the government, which was, perhaps surprisingly, not viewing it in entirely negative terms. The fact that the imperial state was not uniformly opposed to wage increases in the urban sector was affirmed by the minister of labour and social affairs, Getahun Tessema (1970), who explicitly asked employers to raise wages and condemned those 'in their zeal to amass greater profits have rejected demands for wage increases that could well be afforded and were commensurate with the valuable contribution labour had made to the welfare of their enterprise'.

Indeed the upward trajectory of wages was recognised by an ILO report released the year before the revolution, warning that 'trade union pressure' and high civil service pay had possibly made urban wages 'too dear' (ILO 1973: 56). While it found civil service wages the most concerning, it recommended 'immediate wage restraint' in the manufacturing sector too, 'especially on entrant wages' (ILO 1973: 56). Considering the source, this statement is quite noteworthy. Outside of vividly demonstrating the degree to which wages had indeed grown up to this point, the report also highlights the issue of pay differentials within the waged sector. These include the difference between civil servants and production workers; between workers in unionised and non-unionised sectors; between urban and rural workers; and between male and female workers – where the first mentioned categories were consistently paid more than the latter. Since the concern here is with organised labour, a short discussion of how this aspect was portrayed is warranted. 'The unionised sector' the report states, covered 'approximately 70 plants, largely owned by the government or by foreigners'. Union pressures in this sector had resulted in a situation where 'high wages' prevailed, which for many workers entailed wages 'substantially in excess of ETB 2.00 per day' (ILO 1973: 53). As long as relatively high wages only prevailed in a comparatively small share of the economy, this was deemed to be tolerable. But wages in the unionised sector, the report claimed, nevertheless needed 'to be monitored carefully', to avert the danger that 'collectively bargained wage spills over into the non-unionised sectors' (ILO 1973: 54). This concern was also showcased in the government's ban on unionisation in larger sectors of the economy and in its

effort to supress unrest and organisation spilling into the agrarian waged economy. That strategy had apparently been successful, because although there were indications that rural wages were growing[223], they were still assumed to amount to only 'around 40 percent of urban wages' in 1973 (ILO 1973: 55).

In the civil service, however, the opposite trend was observed, as the possession of a higher degree was greatly rewarded. Ginzberg and Smith (1967: 91) identified this premium on education as 'one of the outstanding characteristics of the Ethiopian scene', with BA; MA; and PhD degree holders commanding monthly starting wages of 450; 550; and 750 ETB respectively. By 1972, the average yearly civil service wage was 1860 ETB, which was calculated to be 500 ETB higher than wages in other urban sectors (ILO 1973: 53). This was considered 'very high' by the ILO, which stated that 'a wage of [ETB] 600 per month for a new graduate is clearly excessive [and] approximately equal to the earnings of new graduates in the UK' (ILO 1973: 53). But wages, as has been demonstrated in the above, where set to collapse across the board, and the fall was the sharpest for those found in the highest brackets.

The collapse of wages following the revolution is evident in the literature as much as in statistics. Mulatu and Yohannis (1988: 108-109) observed that by 1981 real manufacturing wages had declined to 61 percent of their 1974 level, while a DoS (1986: 112) report for 1985 stated that 'while consumer prices have soared, wages have not risen in 10 years'. The result, according to the report, was a dire situation in which 'wage earners at the bottom of the pay scale can no longer be said to earn a salary that provides a decent living for workers and family'. If this was true in 1985, it was probably all the more so in 2010, as real wages had slid further in the intervening time.

Initially, the mechanism triggering the fall was a wage freeze imposed by the PMAC, combined with high levels of inflation. The wage freeze was eventually partially lifted, but not to a degree where it allowed real wages to recover. The WPE's ambition was to progressively narrow the wage gap by raising the lowest wages by the relatively highest percentages, and retain a wage cap on the comparatively highest levels. This may have had some effect on wage distribution as is discussed in the below, but it was offset and dwarfed by the rise in the retail price index (Robinson 1982:

[223] Girma (2017: 47), for example, has found that wages for migrant agricultural wage labourers in Wondo Genet grew from 0.50 ETB/day in 1966 to 0.75 ETB around the time of the 1974 revolution.

32). While the wage gap may have slightly narrowed then, it only did so while *all* manufacturing real wages was in a midst of a collapse. Several additional non-waged forms of surplus extraction that were introduced compounded the problem, including nominally voluntary – but in reality requisitioned – contributions of labour, and the equally 'voluntary' cash contributions solicited for the war effort, which included a full month's pay each year.

A powerful mechanism for regulating the movement of real wages available to the PMAC/WPE was the government's issuance of guidelines for overall wage movement in the dominant state-owned sector. There was never any pretence as to the reasons of state intervention in wage setting. Tesfa Gebremariam (1987:147), who by the time was a MoLSA official[224], stated that under circumstances wherein underdevelopment and poverty prevailed 'any social and economic planning of necessity has to constrain free collective bargaining'. 'Over the last 11 years', he confirmed, 'the government has issued guide-lines for the increase of wages for the public sector to be observed during negotiations'.

It should be noted that there was an upturn in the number of collective agreements signed during the PMAC/WPE era – no less than a twentyfold increase in the first decade of PMAC/WPE rule according to Tesfa (1987: 149). However, the importance of this factor pales when the coercive atmosphere and the commandist manner in which it took place is factored in. Not only were the unions hierarchically organised, subjected to total centralism, and eventually the command of the party, but, as indicated, the wage setting mechanism of the state lingered heavy. 'Nothing is regarded as outside the scope of negotiation except, of course, the areas where government regulations determine the parameters for the public sector for some negotiable issues like the setting of the maximum increase in wages', Tesfa (1987:149) stated without a hint of irony. Considering that these areas of government regulation and parameter-setting were quite extensive, and, as indicated, included wages, this in effect meant that most essential issues were outside the scope of bargaining. Moreover, the state reserved extensive rights when it came to enforcing collective agreements throughout the economy. This included the prerogative of the minister of labour and social affairs to 'declare the draft collective agreement proposed by one of the parties to be binding upon the [other] party', if he found a party to be negotiating in 'bad faith'. Moreover,

[224] Tesfa had been ousted from CELU in the mid-1970s, after having participated in Alem Abdi's attempt to put the confederation on a pro-government footing.

even on issues where the parties were in agreement, the minister had the right to refuse to register the agreement should it contravene any existing law, regulation, or policy of the government (Tesfa 1987: 148). Throughout the PMAC/WPE era, then, the downward wage movement was established at the level of policy.

Neither the calculation presented above nor the literature indicates that the trajectory of this movement has been substantially altered, or that real wages have been allowed to recover, since the PDRE became the FDRE. Two years after the fall of the WPE, DoS (1994) reported that although Ethiopia had no legal provisions of a minimum wage, a public sector floor of 105 ETB/month had been set, and that while the situation had now reversed to one wherein the private sector tended to pay comparatively higher wages than the public 'many workers earn less than the minimum wage'. The wages paid, it was assessed, were nowhere near sufficient. Citing the Ethiopian Office for the Study of Wages and Other Remunerations, it stated that a family of five would at the time require a monthly income of 430 ETB 'to maintain a bare minimum standard of living', which meant that 'even with two family members earning the public sector minimum wage, the family receives only about 50 percent of that needed for healthful subsistence' .

Contrasting with the direct manipulation of nominal wages in the PMAC/WPE era, the mechanisms that have undercut wages in the FDRE period have been a sliding decline reinforced by repeated devaluations of the exchange rate of the ETB – one in the in the early 1990s, another one in 2011; and a most recent one in October 2017; the removal of a range of subsidies on consumer goods; increasing taxation and new forms of taxes, such as the value added tax introduced in 2003; and, partially resulting from this, reoccurring bouts of inflation. As the World Bank has stated, because of the size of the public sector, inflation is a mechanism particularly effective to checking real wage in the Ethiopian economy, making them 'particularly prone to political "manipulation"' (2016:51). In this manner, real wages have, whenever showing indications of recovery, been re-repressed. In 1998, a report found that wages in the public sector had not yet been compensated for the 1991 'inflationary shock' (Khrisnan et. al. 1998). Public wages therefore remained lower than when the WPE fell, although wages in the private sector had recovered. Moreover, the World Bank (2016:51) found evidence of a real wage drop between 2003 and 2014, with only a slight recovery recorded in the two last years of the period. By 2016, Ethiopian labour costs were allegedly 'on average one tenth the price of those in China', with blue-

collar manufacturing wages hovering around 700-800 ETB a month (Mills 2016). A plethora of accounts substantiates this description of the general level of wages[225], with one author – implausibly – suggesting that Ethiopian manufacturing wages have become 'the lowest in the world' (Wuilbercq 2017). Even the World Bank (2015: 55) has found the situation concerning. It described manufacturing wages for unskilled workers as so low as unable to drop any further, thus 'preventing the market from clearing'. What prevented wages from falling further was not, the World Bank argued, high 'reservation wages', but rather 'because they are already clustered below the food poverty line' and any further downward movement would render workers incapable of meeting 'minimum nutritional requirements' – in other words, they have hit rock bottom.

Even the comparatively privileged sectors have seen real wages fall over the decades. As has been discussed, the privileged position of public employees has deteriorated, but so has the position of some of the most advantaged workers in the private sector. At Addis Ababa's Hilton Hotel, for example, the 2017 monthly minimum pay was 600 ETB – to be compared with a 70 ETB-floor when the hotel opened in 1969 (Fasika 2017a). As the computation above indicates, the price index has multiplied by over 30 times in the same period, meaning that the real minimum wage at the hotel in 2017 was in fact less than a third – and probably less than a quarter – of its 1969 level[226]. Meanwhile, the 'urban bias', so prominently displayed in the past had, at least partially, been reversed. As noted in chapter 3, moreover, the ratio of surplus extraction in the peasant economy has been progressively relaxed, contrasting sharply with the findings from the manufacturing sector. Girma (2017: 47) found an example of a worker employed in a perfume factory in 1994 and 1995, making 2 ETB/day, while, at the same time assessing that a private farmer would make around 3 ETB/day, illustrating the decline of industrial wages relative to agrarian income. Girma (2017: 48) moreover found that agricultural wage labour in Wondo Genet's khat farms fetched 50 ETB/day in 2012, which would compare favourably with manufacturing wages.

Summing up, the aggregate national statistics indicate a number of conspicuous shifts that have occurred with regards to manufacturing wages in Ethiopia over the last five decades. Most fundamentally, a period of incline through the 1960s and 1970s shifted, around the middle of the

[225] See, for example, Dijkstra (2015) and Assefa et al. (2016) for typical substantiating accounts of starting wages ranging in the monthly 600-800 ETB range. See also CSA (2014) for a breakdown of the incomes of waged workers.
[226] Incidentally, the workers of Hilton Addis Ababa have in the past constituted an unlikely source of labour militancy. Its union was active in CELU's radical opposition in the 1970s, and its President, Shumiye Tefera, was a member of the PWC.

decade, into a sudden and sharp slump, followed by a long period of secular decline, interrupted by temporary episodes of stabilisation. The degree to which this holds true in the individual workplaces selected for the case studies is something that is discussed in the following sections.

6.3 Case study: the Bahir Dar Textile Factory

The Bahir Dar Textile Factory was constructed in 1961 and production commenced the year after. The factory was financed by Italian war reparation funds and the location of the factory, in the North-eastern Gojam province[227], was intended as a reward to the people of the region for having played a prominent role in the resistance to Italian occupation. Bahir Dar, however, was a poor provincial city[228] and it had an immense shortage of educated personnel. As a result, management staff and the skilled workers were recruited from other regions – particularly the central Shoa region and Eritrea. Meanwhile, the unskilled workforce consisted largely of locals. This created tensions in the workforce.

The factory was state-owned until 2017, when it was sold to *Tiret*, a conglomerate established by the ruling front's constituent party in the Amhara National Regional State – the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM). It has, however, been managed under different arrangements. In its early years the factory was managed by, first, Yugoslavs, and later Indian executive staff, before management was Ethiopianised in the 1970s (Demmelash 2014, personal interview). Between 1975 and the early 1990s it was incorporated in the National Textile Corporation (NTC), before, again, being re-established as a separate state-owned share company. Struggling with profitability, however, it was leased out to Chinese investors in the early 2000s, but the lease was cancelled after 18 months and management was reverted to the state. This state of things came to an end only in 2017.

Despite having been established within an import-substitution regime which granted the textile industry high levels of protection – ranging from 90 percent to 526 percent depending on product in the 1970s (Eshetu 1973: 50) – the Bahir Dar factory has rarely, if ever, been profitable. In fact,

[227] Since the establishment of the FDRE located within the Amhara National Regional State.

[228] According to its Governor at the time, Gaitachew Bekele (1993: 125-130), Bahir Dar in 1961 had no paved road, and only the port administrator's office and residence had piped water and electricity. The imperial government's plans for the city, however, were ambitious, and with the support of West German planners it was expected to grow to become a sizeable and important economic hub. The textile factory was the centrepiece of this plan. Other provisions included the concurrent construction of a referral hospital, a polytechnic institute funded by the Soviet Union, a teacher's training school, and a hydroelectric plant at the nearby Blue Nile falls.

it has been described as ‘a financial disaster’ that had not avoided losses for a single year by 1973 (Eshetu 1973: 53). With the decline in industrial profitability that came with the economic crisis of the subsequent years, it is unlikely that this situation improved much, and when it was brought up for privatisation in the early 2000s its inability to generate profits was a key factor. The fact that it would take more than a decade and additional state investments before a willing and capable buyer could be found speaks for its poor profitability.

As is generally the case, textile production in Ethiopia has been and remains a very labour intensive endeavour. This, by all accounts, is one of the main reasons it developed to become the largest manufacturing subsector in Ethiopia – both in terms of the number of engaged workers and in terms of output (Eshetu 1973). The workforce largely consisted of women[229]. At the commencement of production, the workforce consisted of 1 000 employees, a number that had grown to 1900 two years after, reaching 2 345 in the mid-late 1960s (Demmelash 2015, personal interview; ILO 1984: 14; Eshetu 1973: 54). This figure was to grow slightly in the decade that followed, and thereafter remain relatively stable until 1991 at the very least, when the factory employed 2 909 workers (Tarpinian 1992). Renewed attempts to achieve profitability, and an end to the practice of ‘stuffing’ after the fall of the WPE, have since reduced the workforce to around 1 500 workers.

In August 1963 the Bahir Dar Textile Factory Workers' Union was registered with the Labour Department of the MNCD with 550 members. This figure grew to 1 200 in 1964; 1 725 in September 1965; and by 1970 it had acquired a membership of 2 200 workers (ILO 1984: 14; Suter 1966: 52; CELU 1970). Through several years of the 1960s and early 1970 its president was Workneh Atalai, a charismatic labour leader from Gojam – who was no stranger to controversy.

[229] That the majority of production workers were women is reflected in the fact that while in the factory’s overall workforce women were slightly outnumbered by men in 1964, almost 60 percent of union members that same year were women (ILO 1964). This tallies with Killion's (1984: 442) assessment that in the mid-1960s, ‘60% of all Ethiopian textile workers were women’. According to Killion, ‘the high proportion of unskilled women workers had some effect on textile workers' solidarity, as the female workforce had a high turn-over rate due to marriages and pregnancies’. Moreover, he claimed that ‘because of the frequent subordination of women in Ethiopian social structures, female workers usually deferred to male managers and co-workers, and they rarely played an active role in workers' organisations’. While it is an indisputable fact that labour leaders, with a few notable exceptions from, for example, Ethiopian Airlines and in CELU's General Council – largely tended to be male, the question of whether the gendered division of the workforce had any effect on solidarity is something that has to be empirically examined rather than simply asserted. Bondestam (1975: 545) pointed out that while ‘it was thought until a couple of years ago, that women are traditionally less prone to labour disputes, and are therefore less of a threat in factories that depend on a large number of unskilled workers… a strike among the textile workers in 1971 showed… that this assumption was wrong’.

According to Killion (1984: 511), Workneh purportedly played on regionalist sentiments and divisions within the workforce, while, allegedly regarding the union's finances 'as his own'[230]. The charge of embezzlement would lead to his removal by court order (Killion 1984: 512), but having been reinstated by 1970, Workneh claimed that the relationship with management was 'very harmonious' (CELU 1970: 50). By this time, three consecutive collective agreements had been entered into, the first one as early as February 1964[231]. This had the enterprise adopt a check-off system which greatly benefited the finances of the union, and as a result the union had been able to establish a bakery and bar for the workers, as well as a school for the their children (CELU 1970: 50). The collective agreement furthermore included free medical care (Suter 1966).

While individual workers at the factory suffered from a similar lack of employment security as other workers in the 1960s and early 1970s, the 1975 labour law and the incorporation of the factory into the NTC changed this. For the subsequent period 'the process required to terminate workers remained highly structured and time-consuming' (Tarpinian 1992: 9). It required the management to issue three warnings before dismissing a worker, with managers allegedly complaining that the process could take up to a year (Tarpinian 1992: 9). As a result of this, and the rigid rules surrounding resignations and transfers, staff turnover remained very low from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, and managers in the early 1990s reported generally low levels of absenteeism and 'good' labour-management relations (Tarpinian 1992: 9). Although the period after the adoption of the 1993 labour law and the break-up of NTC has seen some deregulation of requirements to dismiss workers, it seems unlikely that employment security has deteriorated to the level of the 1960s.

Despite having entered into collective agreements at a relatively early stage, and despite some beneficial provisions, however, wages at the factory had been described as relatively low when compared to other manufacturing establishment, including other textile industries (ILO 1964: 10). According to Ginzberg and Smith (1967: 98) wages at the factory compared poorly with those in comparable enterprises in the mid-1960s – unskilled workers of the former earned between 0.65 and 0.80 ETB daily, while standard wages of unskilled workers in the sector generally ranged

[230] His alleged regionalism is an issue also raised by Demmelash (2015, personal interview) and Fissehatsion (1983, interview with Tom Killion).
[231] The Bahir Dar Textile Factory was only the second workplace in the empire to conclude a collective agreement, a few days after HVA (Stutz 1967: 140).

between 0.80 and 1.50 ETB, or, for example, between 0.90 and 1.00 ETB at the Indo-Ethiopian Textile Factory[232]. After being incorporated into the NTC, government-set wage policy was strictly applied. This included putting all workers 'on a fixed pay scale, without regard to production' and without any incentive plans (Tarpinian 1992: 9). As has been discussed in the above, these pay scales were ungenerous, and were moreover only rarely and very cautiously revised, despite inflation. Whether the situation improved after 1992 is not evident from the literature, but is a proposition that is tested in the following section.

The Bahir Dar Textile Factory saw several episodes of labour unrest. Beginning in its early days, workers, according to a factory union leader, created 'constant disturbances' (Demmelash 2015, personal interview). Wage and workload related complaints fuelled strikes 'all the time' in the first years of operation (Demmelash 2015, personal interview). Although the most acute phase of this round of conflict came to an end with the signing of the first collective agreement unrest never disappeared completely. Although no strike was organised by the union in the following years, repeated threats were issued reminding the management that another strike would see the full workforce walk out (Demmelash 2015, personal interview). Such threats underlined the negotiations of the subsequent collective agreements.

In 1967 ICFTU representative Kindström (1967d) reported that the union had been beset by 'internal trouble' which was 'worrying CELU very much' and that Fissehatsion Tekie, CELU's general secretary, had been dispatched to Bahir Dar to mediate a solution. Killion (1984: 512-13), probably referring to the same episode, describes how unrest resurfaced when regionalist sentiments and unrest spread across the factory and into the city, in response to Workneh being suspended. Since workers were armed, security forces had to be called in before new elections could be held. Workneh, however, was reinstated again some two years later and remained in office until 1974.

According to fellow Bahir Dar labour leader Demmelash Tebekew (2015, personal interview) it was the workers themselves who eventually removed Workneh. This took place in the context of renewed unrest around the time of the revolution, and amid accusations that Workneh was dividing the workers. Eventually Workneh and a number of other labour activists were transferred from the

[232] The same figures for skilled factory workers were monthly 50-80 ETB, while the category of 'production workers industry' were reported to earn 40 ETB/month (Ginzberg and Smith 1967: 98).

factory. His removal facilitated the election of a new batch of labour leaders more to the liking of the new government, but it did not put an end to unrest at the factory. The warehouses of the factory were set on fire in 1975[233], and 'several strikes'[234] were held before repression stamped out the resistance (Demmelash 2015, personal interview; Killion 1984). For this task, no less than 200 workers were enrolled in the factory's Revolutionary Guard[235] militia and equipped with 70 firearms (PMAC Provisional Revolutionary Guard Committee 1977). The chairman of the union and the workers' discussion forum, Seife Asnake[236], was one of around 10 workers and labour leaders killed in the struggles that followed the revolution (Demmelash[237] 2015, personal interview), while many more were arrested. According to Negede (2014: 254) a second round of purges of MEISON affiliated unionists included 20 workers at the factory. This appears to have concluded the phase of open contestation and ushered in a period of relative tranquillity.

During the mid-1980s, the union developed a number of grievances against factory management and the NTC in the process of bargaining for a new collective agreement. In the absence of any permissible outlet for the frustrations, however, the union was left to write petitions and meekly worded appeals to the corporation and the Ministry of Industry to seek resolution – quite frequently met with strongly worded rebuttals from the latter. The only major incident that took place within the corporation – and one of very few strikes to be attempted during the high rule of WPE in total – was the Asmara/Barottolo Textile Factory strike in 1983, discussed in the previous chapter, and the outcome of that strike left no question as to how the re-emergence of insubordination would be treated.

But in the 1990s, the factory's union again became embroiled in turbulence. The first episode that garnered attention was an alleged sabotage in September 1993, conducted by workers who

[233] This happened in the Ethiopian calendar year of 1967, which is most likely to refer to the first eight and a half months of 1975 G.C., but could also refer to the last three and a half months of 1974.
[234] Note, however, that while the representative of the Bahir Dar textile factory union, Adugna Regassa, signed the 1975 September CELU resolution threatening a general strike, the official *Ethiopian Herald* (1975i) claims that the Bahir Dar textile factory workers did not take part in the September 1975 general strike attempt.
[235] The revolutionary guards – የአብዮት ጥብቃ – organised in workplaces and neighbourhoods was a central instrument of the state-sanctioned violence, discussed in more detail by Wiebel (2014). In most factories, a guard squad numbering between 10 and 50 members, equipped with a dozen rifles, was deemed entirely sufficient. The number of guards and arms at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory is somewhat of an outlier.
[236] According to Demmelash, Seife and other workers had been accused of propagating the formation of a 'Provisional People's Government', the EPRP's central demand at the time. Seife's personnel file at the Bahir Dar textile factory, confirms that he was killed in 1978, within the 'red terror' campaign.
[237] Demmelash himself was arrested no less than three times during this period.

removed key equipment, causing a shutdown (*EH* 1993a). In late 1993, moreover, the arrest and subsequent disappearance of Abebe Aynekulu, a technician and trade unionist who was alleged to be an EPRP member, caused unrest at the factory (*EH* 1994a). In response to the disappearance, the union leaders called on workers to demonstrate and demand to learn of his whereabouts. The plan was to march from the factory into the city, but the demonstrating workers were intercepted by security forces at the factory gates. In what followed, 40 workers who were considered seditious were suspended by the factory management, operating under the auspices of a senior ANDM official[238] (Getachew 2017, personal interview). In the mid-1990s, moreover, the factory and its union became involved in the conflict within CETU and between CETU and the state. The general secretary of the union was arrested in 1994, while the chairman and an executive committee member were arrested in October that same year (Dawey 1994e). The latter two were released a couple of months later, but they were not allowed to return to their jobs (Dawey 1994e).

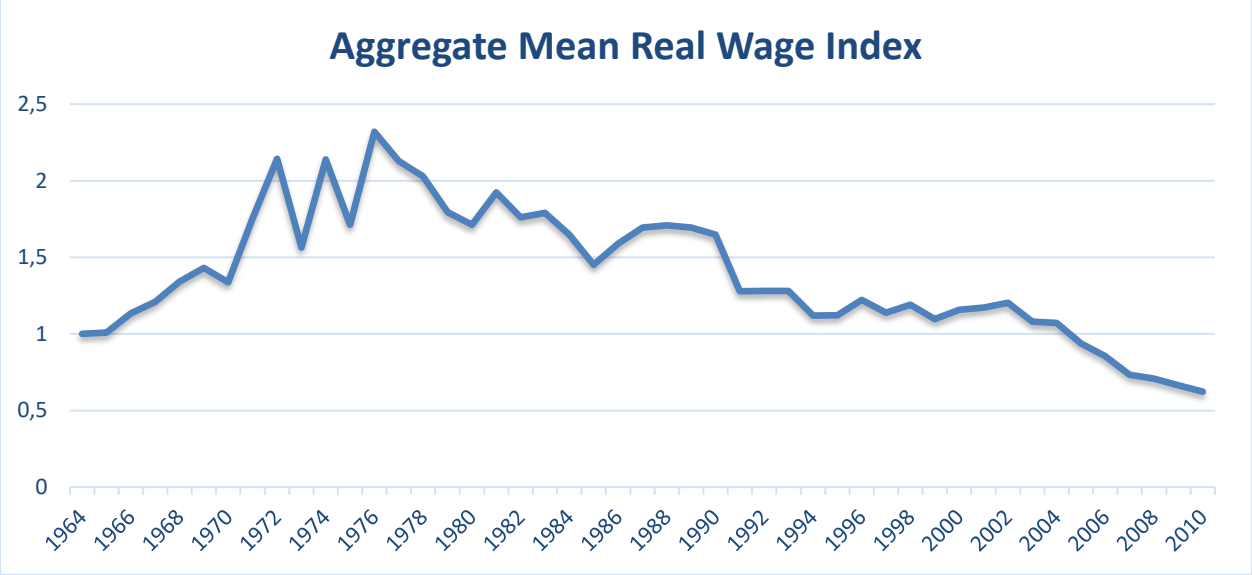
6.3.1 Wages and unrest at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory

From the data contained in the sample[239] of digitised personnel files from the Bahir Dar Textile Factory, the following index of the aggregate average real wage movement has been calculated.

[238] MoLSA would eventually overturn the decisions to suspend the workers (Getachew 2017, personal interview).

[239] The sample which this section is calculated from, consists of data harvested from 850 personnel files from the Bahir Dar Textile Factory. The files have been randomly selected from a series of 4221 personnel files digitised by the IISH. Each file consists of, on average, around 75 pages. From these files, all data on wages, unrest/disciplinary action, position, gender, years of service, dismissals, and other reasons for termination were harvested and compiled in a database. Wages were then deflated by the computed Addis Ababa Price Index published by the CSA in the annual *Statistical Abstract*. SPSS software was then used to calculate mean incidents of unrest, wages etc. for the workers active during each year – a number that diverges from year to year, but is generally higher for earlier years, and comparatively lower towards the end of the period, due to the fact that not all workers who were active those years have yet completed their employment at the factory, and those files have therefore not yet been transferred to the archives.

Chart: Aggregate Mean Real Wage Index from Bahir Dar Textile Factory Sample[240]



Source: Author's computation of data from Bahir Dar Textile Factory personnel archives sample

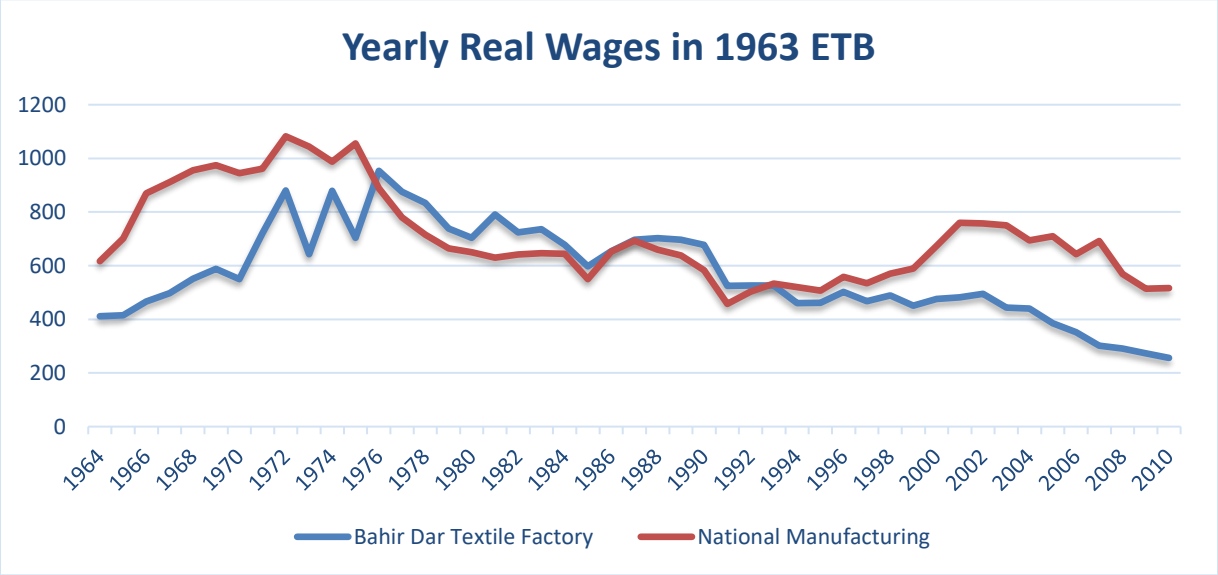
A number of things are apparent from the chart. The first one is that much like wage movement registered in the data from across the manufacturing sector, there is a sharp rise in real wages in the years between the early 1960s – when the factory was established – and the mid-1970s. Subsequent to this, wages at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory too embarked on a prolonged decline. In the initial years the fall was sharp, consuming somewhere around a third and two-fifths in the eight years after the 1976 high-water mark. Again, much like for the country-wide sectoral data, there was a slight recovery in the second half of the 1980s, but this was followed by a renewed prolonged decline, and only punctured by periods of stabilisation.

But there are also dissimilarities with the pattern of the national data. The first instance is the fact that the wage swings were distinctively sharper at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory than was the case in the aggregate sector. Real wages at the factory appear to have multiplied by a factor of over 2.3 between the years of 1964 and 1976, only to be reduced to roughly a quarter of that level in the subsequent 34 years. Yet, it took much longer for real wage gains achieved in the first phase to be rolled back at the Bahir Dar textile factory than in the country as a whole. It appears that this

[240] Until 1963, and in some cases afterwards, wages were often recorded in daily terms rather than monthly. When converting daily wages to monthly wages, the 1993 labour proclamation states that 'for purposes of determining the qualifying period of service required for the entitlement of an annual leave, 26 days of service in an undertaking shall be deemed to be equivalent to one month of employment' (FDRE 1993). For this reason, and since the 48 hour workweek has been constant since the 1963 labour proclamation, 26 work days has been calculated to mean one month's pay.

reversal was not completed until the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, while on a national scale the gains from the previous decades had already been consumed by the end of the 1970s. The reasons for this can probably be derived from the discussion above and relate to the particular wage level at the factory. The sharp upswing of wages in the first phase was probably partly explained by the fact that wages at the factory were generally lower than in similar manufacturing establishments in the 1960s. The comparative levels are illustrated in the below.

Chart: Yearly Real Wages in 1963 ETB in Comparison

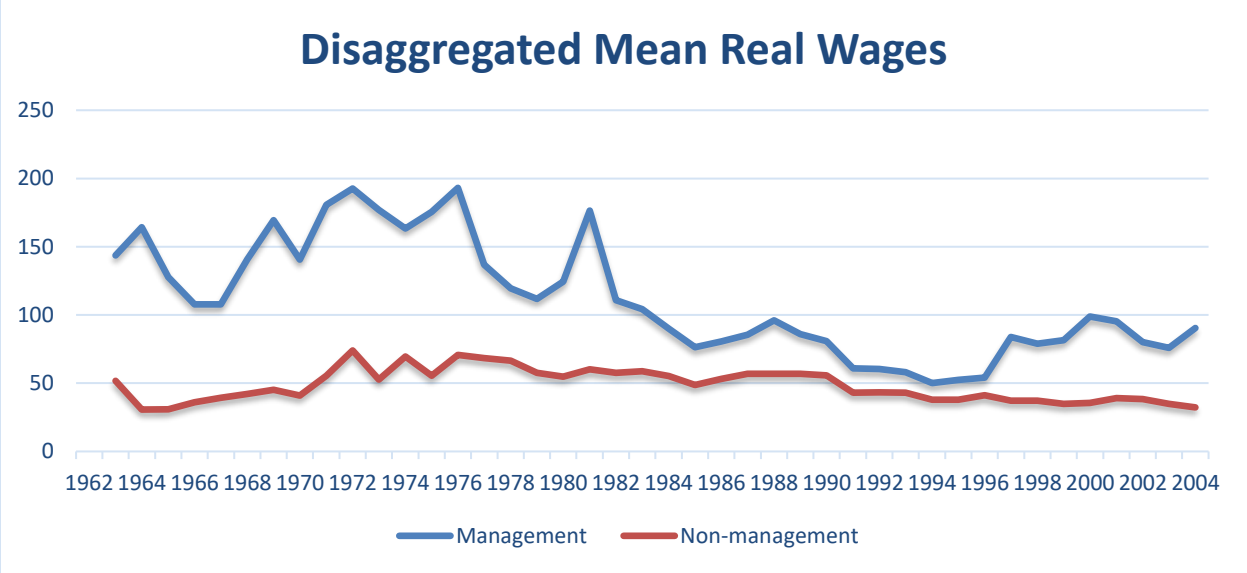


Source: Author's computation of data from Bahir Dar Textile Factory personnel archives sample; CSA's annual *Statistical Abstract* 1963 to 2012/13.

By the mid-1970s wages at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory had converged with, and actually surpassed, average wages in the national manufacturing sector. They remained roughly level until the end of the 1990s. By this time, the factory was no longer at the technological forefront of Ethiopian manufacturing. It may be surmised that the emergence of newer, more profitable manufacturing enterprises may have been a factor that stabilised average wages across the aggregate sector, while such stabilisation did not occur at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory. Whatever the merits of this argument, the chart illustrates how the Bahir Dar Textile Factory workers, who were successful in driving up their wages and reaching parity – and more – with other Ethiopian manufacturing workers through the 1960s and early 1970s, were unable to secure real wages that remained even relatively stable at a later phase. Nevertheless, not all categories of workers faced

the same relative slump. The chart below displays the disaggregated average real wages of management and non-management personnel at Bahir Dar Textile Factory.

Chart: Disaggregated Monthly Mean Real Wages in 1963 ETB for Management and Non-management personnel at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory[241]



Source: Author's computation of data from Bahir Dar Textile Factory personnel archives sample

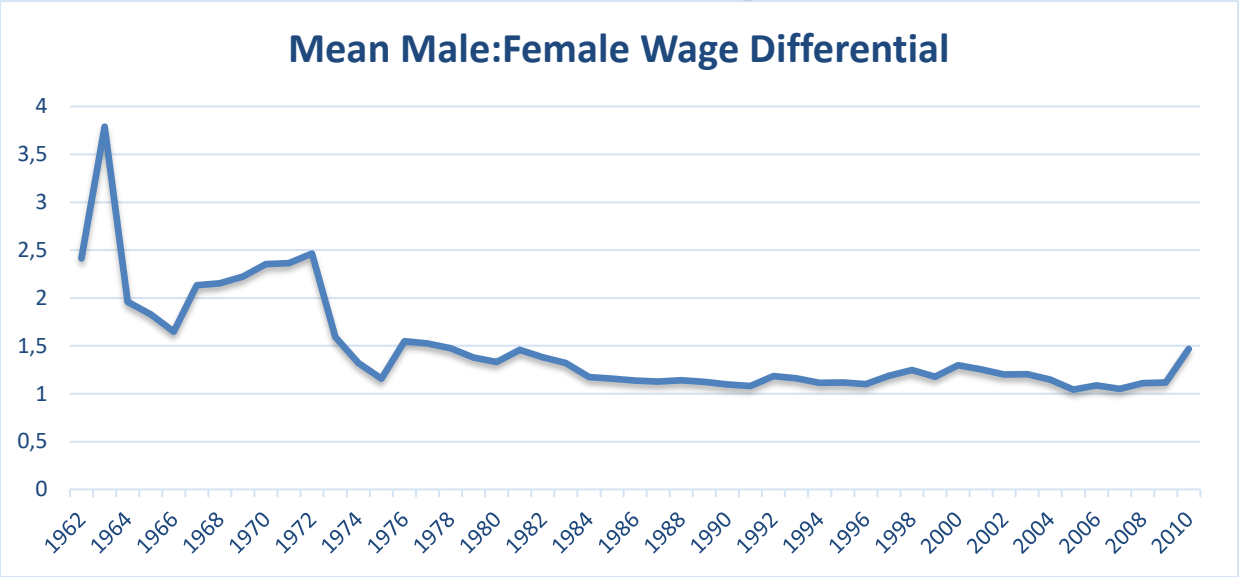
The chart above illustrates the impact of the PMAC/WPE's wage equalisation policies, which cannot be gleaned from the aggregate sectoral data. Beginning in 1976, there was a levelling effect of the cuts and freezes on management wages, combined with an attempt to steer what little room for nominal wage increments existed towards non-management employees. This meant that non-management wages were not as severely affected by the downturn as management wages, and there is every reason to assume that a similar trend of relative convergence prevailed between wages of technical and manual workers. Nevertheless, the data indicates that while shop floor workers were comparatively less afflicted, their real wages too declined sharply – by more than half, or even two-thirds – between 1976 and the late 2000s.

Another aspect of aggregate wage movements pertain to gendered divergences. In order to examine this, the chart below illustrates the differential between mean male and female wages in the Bahir Dar Textile Factory sample. The chart indicates that by the time of the revolution, the most extreme divergence had already subsided, but male wages retained a premium of almost 50

[241] Due to data shortages for the years 1971, 1972 and 2001 management wages for these three years are proxies, derived by combining the preceding and subsequent years and dividing that value by two.

percent over female wages. In the decade after the revolution, however, a more moderate differential of around 10 to 20 percent emerged. From the evidence from the Bahir Dar Textile Factory, it seems that gendered wage discrimination was significantly and systematically rolled back over the five decades measured, even if indications towards a trend of renewed differentiation may be discernible in the data from the last few years of the sample.

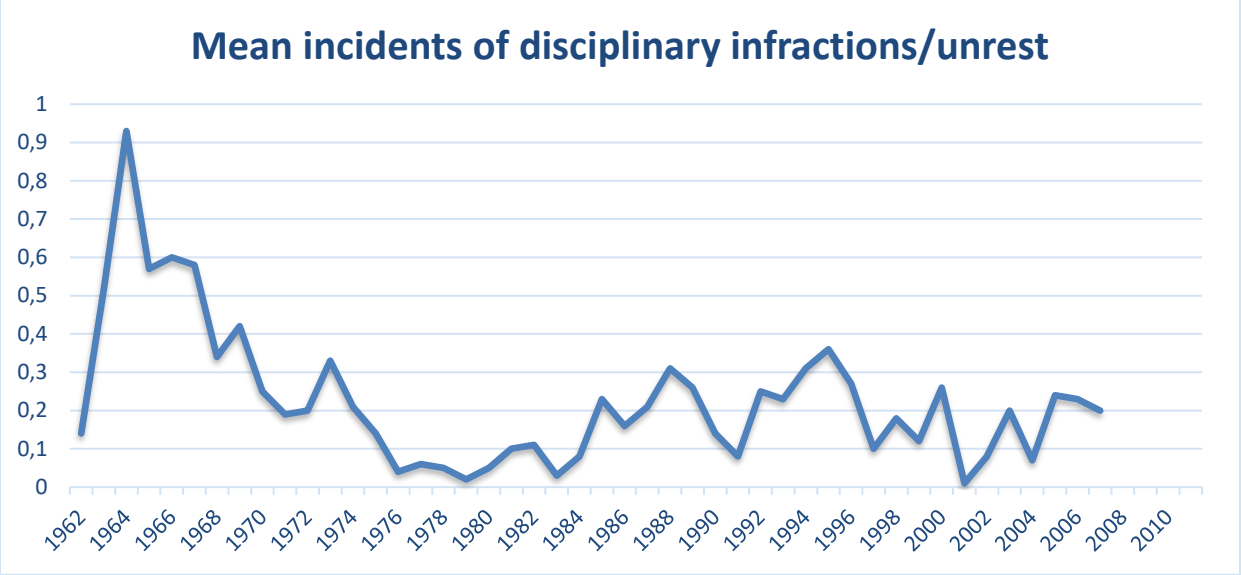
Chart: Differential between mean male and female wages



Source: Author's computation of data from Bahir Dar Textile Factory personnel archives sample

If the discussion above provides an indication of real wage movements at Bahir Dar, the shifting trends in unrest and indiscipline at the factory remain to be examined. In order to measure this, the mean annual incidence of disciplinary transgressions per worker per year has been calculated from those workers in the sample active each year. This includes incidences of disciplinary warnings received by a worker; terminations on disciplinary grounds; engagement in unrest; destruction of property; violence; agitation/incitement; insubordination; and absence that have caused a disciplinary charge – i.e. excluding permitted leave, sick leave, or such occasional absence which has not been deemed worthy of a disciplinary charge; detainment for workplace behaviour; and also protest petitions by workers and resignations carried out in explicit protest against management. This is illustrated in the chart below.

Chart: Mean incidents of disciplinary infractions/unrest



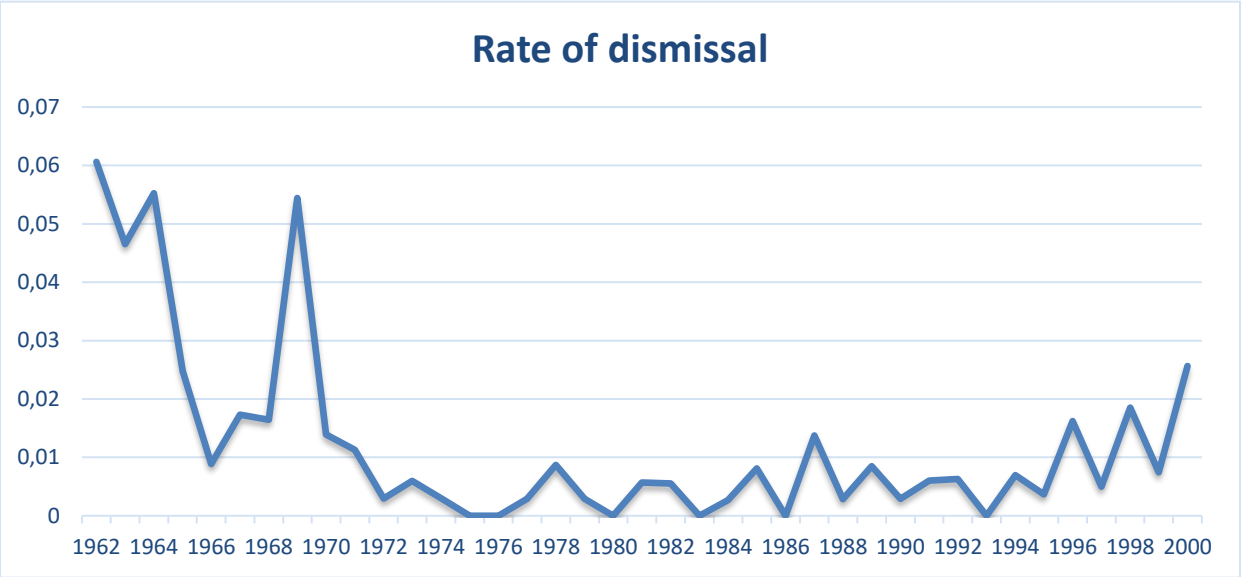
Source: Author's computation of data from Bahir Dar Textile Factory personnel archives sample

A pattern not entirely dissimilar from the chart on national strike activity emerges here, where the first half of the 1960s stands out in terms of unrest/indiscipline. The peak occurred in 1964, the year after the signature of the first collective agreement, but unrest and indiscipline remained relatively high until the revolution, after which it rather abruptly came to an end. During the years of high state terror, unrest and indiscipline remained low, and reappeared in earnest again only in the second half of the 1980s. The next peak came between 1993 and 1996, and coincided with the high tide of the renewed struggle over the labour movement. To this extent, the data derived from the sample largely confirms the schematic outline of shifting levels of labour unrest on a national scale. The most significant differences is that, first, the country-wide spike of labour unrest between 1973 and 1976 is only partially visible in the data from the Bahir Dar Textile Factory. Secondly, the re-emergence of unrest in the second half of the 1980s found in the sample data seems largely unconnected to any broader country-wide wave of unrest. Obviously, either of these differences can be rooted in the manner in which local dynamics differ from national, but it is probably important to note that there is a slight probable tendency in the sample to statistically over-represent incidences of unrest/indiscipline taking place beginning in the mid-1980s. This is because changes in the personnel administration system – first in terms of the separation between wage administration and other personnel affairs, and subsequently because of computerisation – from the 1980s onwards means that some workers disappear from the statistics during uneventful

years[242], but not those that had disciplinary infractions registered. This somewhat inflates the comparative weight of incidences in the last three decades or so, to a degree which is difficult to measure and to discount for.

A final illustration of relevant trends in unrest and indiscipline, but which also reflect employment security, can be found in the chart below. The chart illustrates the share of active workers in the sample who were dismissed at any given year between 1963 and 2000.

Chart: Rate of dismissal of workers



Source: Author's computation of data from Bahir Dar Textile Factory personnel archives sample

As illustrated in the chart above, the early years of operation were marked by frequent dismissals, repeatedly affecting around and above five percent of the workforce per year. Another spike in the rate of dismissal occurred at the end of the 1960s, before settling down to a lower rate. In the 1990s, dismissals again appear to have become more frequent, although not reaching the levels of the 1960s.

[242] For workers whose files indicate a start- and an end-date of employment this is not a problem, as they can be considered active for all intervening years. But for those workers whose files do not include a start- or an end-date, uneventful years before or after any personnel events are registered cannot be counted. Since the files that contains such ambiguities are relatively few – probably less than a quarter, it is presumably not of decisive importance, but it has probably nevertheless slightly inflated mean numbers of incidences in the 1980s to 2000s.

6.4 Case study: CFE/CDE

The CFE[243] was founded in 1908 to traffic the railway that was being built between Djibouti and Addis Ababa, and commenced operation nine years later. It was established as a joint venture between French investors, with the Ethiopian government participating as a minor shareholder. In 1959, however, the Ethiopian state procured sufficient shares to take ownership over half of the stock. Reflecting this new balance, the corporate headquarters were moved from Paris to Addis Ababa that same year. In 1981 the company was renamed *Compagnie du Chemin de Fer Djibouto-Ethiopien* (CDE), and as the Djiboutian state took over ownership of French shares it was turned into a joint Ethiopian and Djiboutian state-owned enterprise. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the CDE entered into a long period of decline and the line fell into disrepair. The creation of a new and separate Ethiopian Railway Corporation in 2007 and the subsequent construction of a new line operated by this corporation, as well as the poaching of personnel and material from the CDE, unequivocally point to the immanent liquidation of the CDE at the time of writing. The actual railway line trafficked by the CDE was decommissioned in 2016.

The Dire Dawa depot on the railway is located midway between Addis Ababa and Djibouti, at the edge of the Eastern Ethiopian highlands, close to the old trading city of Harar. It was selected because of its geographic location on the centre of the line; its proximity to Harar; and the relative cool temperature and access to fresh water its location at the escarpment offered. The area was largely inhabited by Somali and Muslim Oromo, but as the city of Dire Dawa developed around the railway it gathered a distinctly metropolitan population drawn from across and outside the empire. The railway depot included – in addition to the station and administrative offices – supply warehouses, training centres, a fuelling station, a clinic, and the mechanical workshops of the line. Personnel files from across the Ethiopian section of the line[244] was, upon termination of employees, sent to be stored at the Dire Dawa offices. For this reason, the sample of files derived from Dire Dawa represents the whole Ethiopian section of the line.

[243] The CFE was renamed the CDE in 1981, four years after Djibouti gained independence. CFE, in turn, was the successor to the *Compagnie Impériale des Chemins de Fer Ethiopiens*, which had begun work on the railway in 1896 but gone bankrupt in 1907.

[244] The Ethiopian and Djiboutian sections of the line have consistently been administrated separately, with the Djiboutian headquarters located in Djibouti city after the relocation from Paris. Wages on the Djiboutian section of the line were significantly higher than on the Ethiopian section.

CDE/CFE was an almost exclusively male workplace, with nearly all of the few women employed by the enterprise serving in its clinic[245]. The workforce included a high number of foreigners, although these numbers declined through the 1950s, 60s and 70s, as management and skilled labour increasingly was recruited locally. In the aftermath of the revolution, the process of Ethiopianising the workforce was brought to completion.

Although labourers along the line had organised in prior constellations and staged strikes as far back as 1919[246], its labour union, or syndicate as it was called, was established in 1946, with the aim to 'protect Ethiopian workers from racial discrimination'[247] – something that was rampant in the enterprise (Mboya 1958). The *Syndicat des Cheminots* staged three major strikes – in 1947, 1949, and 1955, before it fell into relative inactivity. This combined with a sharp reduction of traffic and staff – going from 5 000 to 2 000 employees – during the 1950s to reduce the importance of the syndicate (Killion 1992: 603). In 1958, as noted, Tom Mboya visited Ethiopia and reported having been told that both the syndicate's president and vice-president had died, under what he perceived to be suspicious circumstances, in that year. Moreover, he was told by railway union officials that the union had become dormant and weak, organising only some 400 workers (Mboya 1958). Nevertheless, in the early 1960s, when the process of establishing a country-wide trade union centre gathered pace, the syndicate had been revitalised and became an important player whose experience, reputation and semi-legal status was drawn upon. Through the 1960s and the early 1970s the union was led by Demena Lemma, who was also a member of CELU's General Council. The syndicate was legally registered according to the Labour Relations Proclamation in December 1962, and by August 1965 it had organised 1 600 members (Suter 1966: 52). The head office of the syndicate was located in Dire Dawa, and it had a branch office in Addis Ababa. It was a relatively well-funded union whose secretariat employed eight staff members and which could afford hiring instructors and purchasing books in early illiteracy campaigns. It also owned land and buildings, including a sprawling members' club in Dire Dawa (CELU 1970; Robinson 1963). As one of the largest and most important unions in the country, it was the seventh to

[245] Only 20 out of 2000 CFE employees in 1964 were female (ILO 1964: 10).
[246] A series of strikes was led by European workers of the enterprise between 1919 and 1926. See Killion (1992) for details on early labour unrest along the railway.
[247] Racial discrimination was expressed both in terms of wage differentials and in the hierarchies of authority, with Europeans occupying the management positions in the early days of the syndicate. As follows, the syndicate's struggle against racial discrimination was aimed at increasing wages of the Ethiopian rank-and-file workers as well as to Ethiopianise management.

negotiate a collective agreement with its enterprise, concluding its first such agreement in December 1966 (Stutz 1967: 140).

In terms of wages, the workers of CFE/CDE have for long periods, across the board, constituted a privileged group of relatively well-paid workers: 'a virtual "labour elite" in relation to other Ethiopian industrial workers during the 1960s', in the words of Killion (1984: 426). The probable reasons for this are several. The technological sophistication of the endeavour combined with the skilled labour force required is one factor. The impact of the high wages paid to European workers – but also Yemeni, Djiboutian and Somali subjects of colonial regimes – was another factor, as Ethiopian workers fought to close the wage gap. Moreover, the sustained militant pressure exercised by the organised workers of the enterprise between 1946 and 1955 repeatedly resulted in wage gains[248]. By the 1960s, the workers on the railway had already achieved substantial wage gains, and were thus relatively well-paid, but they were no longer at the forefront of militancy within the Ethiopian labour movement.

The revitalised CFE union staged its first and only major strike in 1974. By this time it had 1500 members and was led by Teshome Aberra. In addition to the strike, unrest along the line in that same year included a demonstration in Addis Ababa and a sabotage of the line outside Dire Dawa (Killion 1984: 429). In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, however, the leadership of the union rallied behind the PMAC and issued a condemnation of CELU's September 1974 strike call. Although Dire Dawa was a hotbed of industrial unrest and armed repression in the subsequent years, no major strike would again take place along the railway. But that did not mean that all workers were at peace. According to Kiflu Tadesse (2014, personal interview), who visited Dire Dawa in 1974, 'there was a cleavage, there was a conflict between two major sections of the railway union: one section was the administration and those affiliated with the administration – they were mainly French-speaking Ethiopians from the central part of the country – and the other section was the rank-and-file… they were at loggerheads with each other and they were on the verge of calling a strike'. Illustrative of the vacillating position of the syndicate, and the loyalist tendencies of its leadership at the time, is the fact that while the railway workers' union was listed

[248] Killion (1984: 171) has pointed out how the 'wages and benefits which later were to give the railroad its reputation as the "best paid and most secure employment" in the region did not exist at the end of the world war', but were rather 'won by railroad workers only after a prolonged struggle with French capital'. Indeed, by means of an example, the minutes of the Conciliation Commission (1947) to settle the 1947 strike on the railway mentions different categories of workers receiving between 20 and 40 percent wage increments.

as a signatory of the June 1975 protest note against the 'anti-proletarian' actions of the Dire Dawa MoLSA labour department (Various unions 1975), the stamp and the signature[249] of the union was conspicuously missing from the document.

In 1994, with the coming of a new episode of conflict over orientation within the labour movement and between the movement and the state, the CDE union again became involved. Perceived of as supportive of the CETU Executive Committee, its leadership was purportedly the first target for subversion in the conflict. According to Hailu Ourgessa (2017, personal interview), a dissenting faction supported by officials of the industrial federation for transport and communication workers in Addis Ababa was funded and equipped to go to Dire Dawa in their hundreds, where they 'attacked' the leadership and removed it[250]. The episode spelt a final end to what was left of the reputation of militancy of the railway workers' union.

To summarise, the workers of CFE/CDE have played an important role in disseminating the ideas and practices of organisation and collective action among Ethiopian workers. The railway syndicate also provided the Ethiopian labour movement with a key source of militant impulses in its earlier phase. Over the last four decades, however, this vanguard position was abandoned as the organisation of railway workers increasingly came to favour moderation over militancy and bargaining over action.

6.4.1 Wages and unrest on the Railway

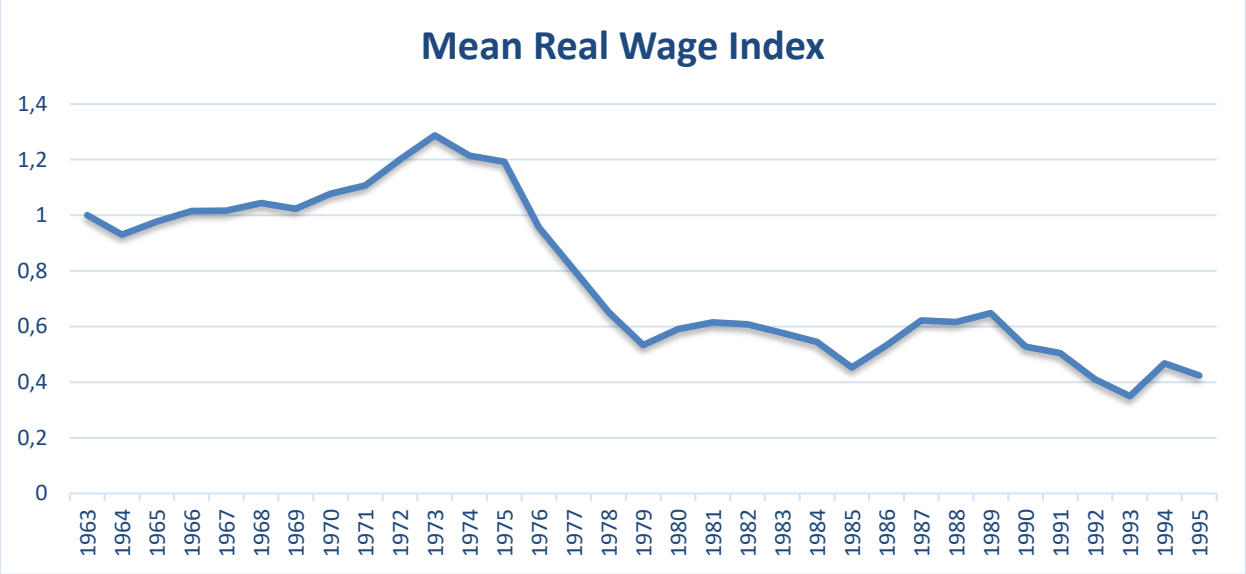
The sample of files collected from the railway corporation is considerably smaller[251] than that of the Bahir Dar Textile Factory, although they span a longer period of time. The comparatively lesser size of the sample is motivated both by pragmatic factors[252], and because the CFE/CDE constitutes an important but a quite extraordinary outlier in Ethiopian wage labour and corporate history – in terms of age; levels of remuneration; the composition of the workforce; and the technical skills required by workers. For these reasons, it has not been deemed useful to disaggregate data between

[249] It was the only large Dire Dawa union listed in the petition where the stamp and signature of the union chairman – Ali Melew in the case of the railway workers union – was missing.
[250] According to Hailu, the removal was the outcome of a 'mob decision' and an apparent threat of violence.
[251] The sample consists of 300 workers' personnel files.
[252] The work on digitising the personnel files in the Dire Dawa depot is still ongoing at the time of writing.

male and female workers[253] or between management and non-management personnel[254]. But there are nevertheless illuminating patterns discernible in the sample.

The chart below presents the mean real wage index from the Dire Dawa Railway Depot sample of CFE/CDE personnel. Because the price index necessary to make deflation possible is only available from 1963 onwards, and because only very few workers in the sample were in employment after 1995, the chart covers only the intermediary years

Chart: Aggregate Mean Real Wage Index from CFE/CDE Sample



Source: Author's computation of data from CFE/CDE personnel archives sample

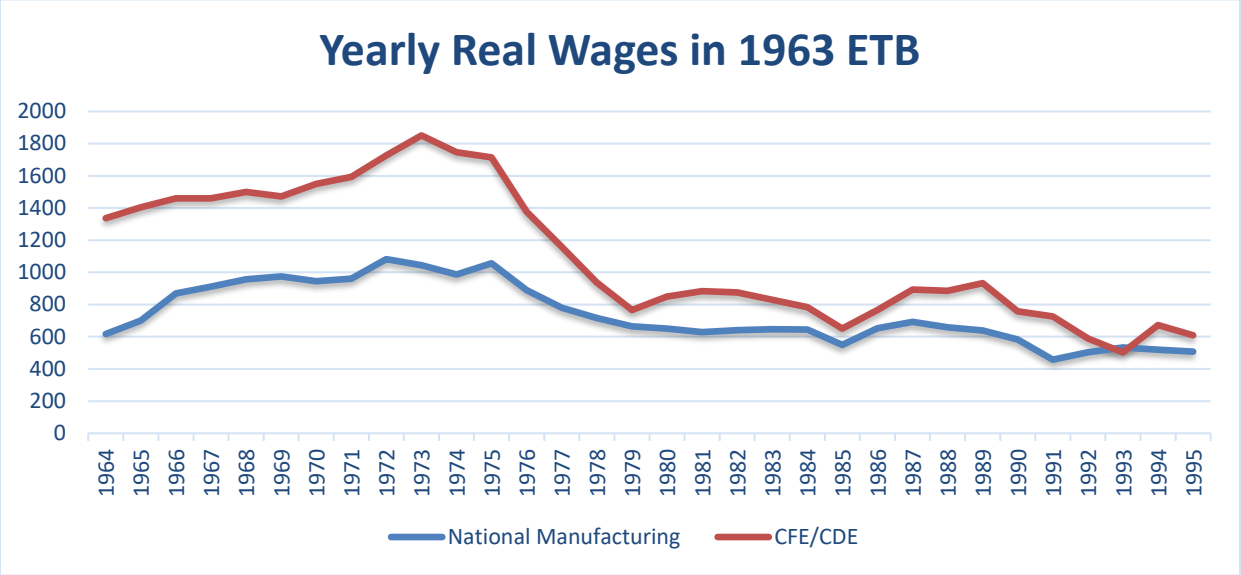
It is apparent from the chart above that while the upward trajectory of national real wages from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s is visible here too, the upswing is neither as sharp as that found in the aggregate manufacturing sector statistics, nor as that in the Bahir Dar Textile Factory sample. The downward turn from the mid-1970s onwards is, on the other hand, much sharper than that found in the aggregate manufacturing sector statistics. The reason for the former is probably that the relatively high wages railway workers had already acquired by the beginning of this period limited the relative weight of nominal wage gains in the early phase. During the downturn, meanwhile, it logically follows that national wage equalisation policies would hit the relatively

[253] Because of the extreme predominance of male workers.

[254] Because of the technological sophistication of the enterprise, skilled non-management personnel at CFE/CDE frequently hade higher wages than most management personnel elsewhere and sometimes also than managers within the enterprise. It would have been more useful to separate technical workers from manual workers, but because no viable standardised way of doing so can be established from the files, it has not been attempted.

privileged railway workers comparatively harder than lesser-paid workers. A chart comparing average real wages on the railway with country-wide manufacturing wages illustrates this point.

Chart: Mean Yearly Real Wages in 1963 ETB in Comparison



Source: Author's computation of data from CFE/CDE personnel archives sample and CSA's annual *Statistical Abstract* 1963 to 2012/13.

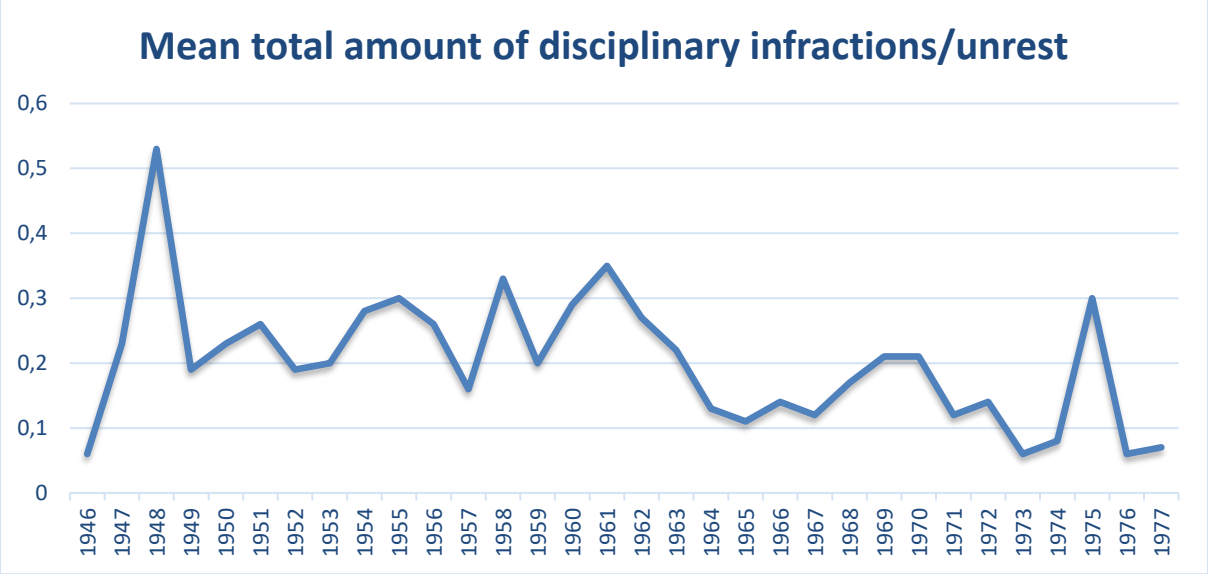
From the chart above, the comparatively privileged position of CFE workers coming into the period of organised labour is readily discernible. Moreover, the chart illustrates how wage equalisation policies led to a convergence of CFE wages with national manufacturing wages, consuming both the wage gains railway workers made prior to the emergence of organised labour country-wide, and those that had been acquired in the contestations of the 1960s and 1970s.

When it comes to unrest and indiscipline on the railway, it cannot be measured in quite the same manner as in the sample from the Bahir Dar Textile Factory. This is because a standardised report system, where each personnel file contained a report chart covering each incidence of unpermitted absence and each yearly wage review – even for years where no revision had taken place – was in use until 1977 only. After 1977, such reviews, and absences, were only sporadically reported. Because of this incompatibility, only absence deemed serious enough to warrant an official warning[255] has been included in the calculation. Moreover, the revision of the reporting system in 1977 implied that significant numbers of workers – for whom no official warnings had been issued

[255] The system of reporting official warnings has been consistent since the 1940s.

– disappear from the statistics during uneventful years, and thus that a significant inflation and distortion of the mean amount of incidents subsequent to this cut-off year would occur. For this reason, the mean yearly averages calculated during these two different periods are not comparable. Hence, the measurement of mean incidents have been divided into two separate charts corresponding to two different reporting system.

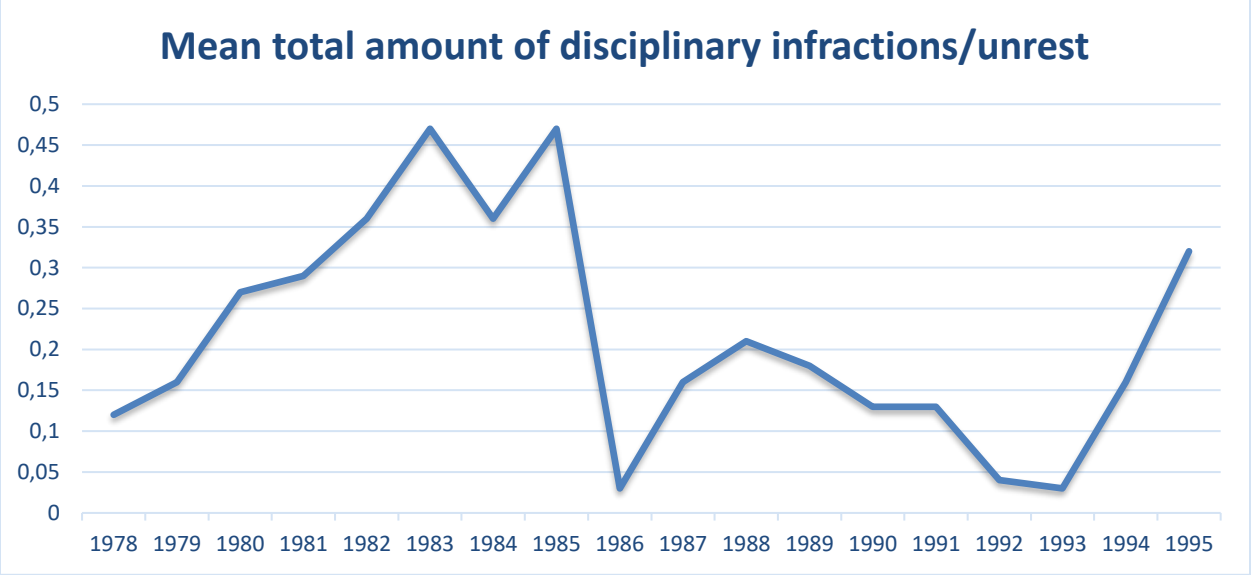
Chart: Mean total amount of disciplinary infractions/unrest at CFE/CDE 1946-1977



Source: Author's computation of data from CFE/CDE personnel archives sample

The above chart confirms the impression of the late 1940s – a period of militancy that saw two major strikes on the railway – as a time of heightened unrest and indiscipline. But even in the aftermath of this period, indiscipline and unrest did not peter out, but remained relatively high, and reached new peaks when the union was reactivated and during the mobilisation for a first collective agreement. Subsequent to the signing of this agreement – with the railway workers' privileges codified and safeguarded – a downturn in activity began, and this downturn was only punctuated by a spike in activity during the outbreak of massive country-wide labour unrest in the 1970s.

Chart: Mean total amount of disciplinary infractions/unrest at CFE/CDE 1978-1995



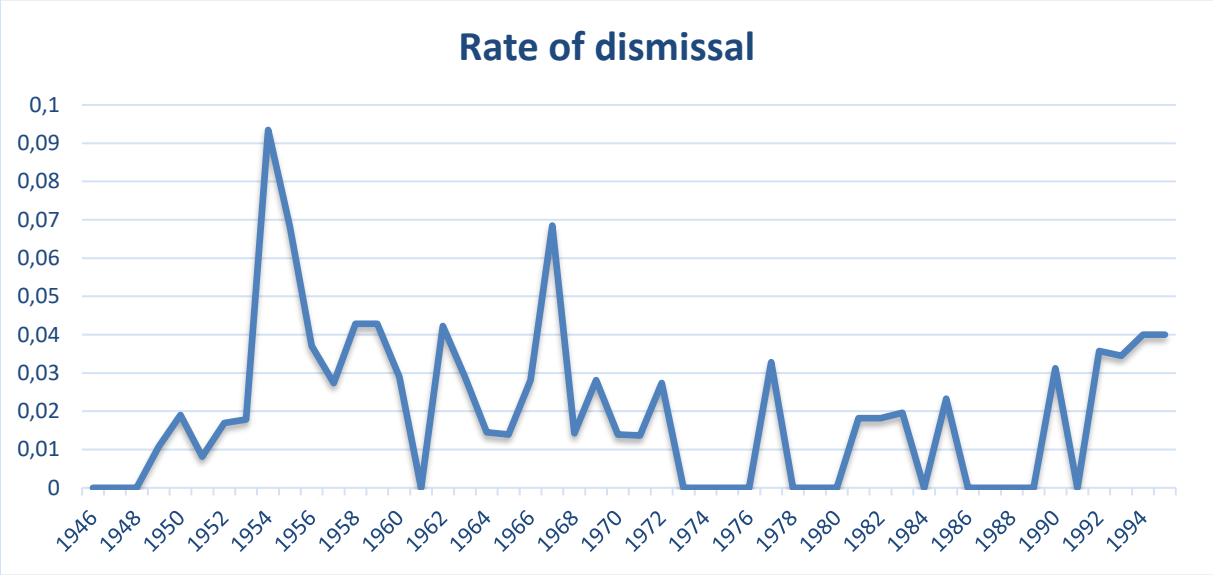
Source: Author's computation of data from CFE/CDE personnel archives sample

The chart above indicates that the early 1980s saw the re-emergence of high levels of unrest and indiscipline. This is comparable to the lesser increase in activity in the 1980s that was visible in the Bahir Dar Textile Factory sample, although it only appeared in the second half of the decade in the latter. The reason for this surge cannot readily be derived from neither the data, the literature, nor the national context. As this manifestation of renewed activity came at the end of the most serious drop in real wages on the railway, it can be speculated that this may have constituted a factor. Moreover, as this period of activity saw the end of the fall of real wages and a partial recovery, it may also be speculated that these two factors were related. This, however, is difficult to substantiate. Whatever the explanation, the year 1986 marked the end of the period. The next period of increased activity coincided – as it did in the Bahir Dar Textile Factory – with the peak of the second cycle of struggle over and within the labour movement. In this process, as mentioned above, the CDE union was an early target for subversion. Much like at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory, the latter period of activity came to an end roughly at the same time as a new co-opted national labour centre emerged.

Finally, at the CFE/CDE too, the rate of dismissal indicate a higher level of indiscipline and restiveness, and/or a lower level of job security, before the revolution, as illustrated in the chart below. The rate of dismissal was particularly high in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s. The years of PMAC/WPE rule, on the other hand, were marked by a very low rate of dismissal. Much like

at the Bahir Dar Textile Factory, this appears to indicate either lower levels of indiscipline and unrest, greater job security during this period, or both.

Chart: Rate of dismissal of workers at CFE/CDE 1946-1995



Source: Author's computation of data from CFE/CDE personnel archives sample

6.5 Summary: wages and unrest

The examination of the data on wages and unrest presented in the above has generated a number of findings and indications. The most striking and obvious finding, observable in the aggregate country-wide statistics and reinforced by the case study data, pertains to the swings in the movement of real wages in the Ethiopian manufacturing sector since the early 1960s, and, it appears, in related waged sectors. They consist of a pronounced upward trajectory through the 1960s and early 1970s, which in the midst of the revolution shifted to a steep and prolonged downward trajectory, after which real wages intermittently stabilised over certain periods and continued to decline over others, but never substantially recovered.

The data presented decidedly contradicts Killion's (1984: 476-477) claim that CELU's leadership's ‘gradualist policy [failed] to result in significant material or political gains for Ethiopian workers during the 1960s’. On the one hand, as was discussed in Chapter 4, political gains were made through the 1960s and early 1970s, which placed the labour movement in a central position in the political convulsions that followed. In this chapter it has been demonstrated that material gains too were made, in terms of progressively increasing real wages. While it may be true that these gains cannot be reduced to outcomes of the policies of the leadership, and that it was in fact the pressures

from outside and frequently even against the leadership that provided the propelling force of these developments, the standard depiction of the period as one in which workers failed to make meaningful advances does not hold up to scrutiny. Whether because of, despite of, or unrelated to the policies of the leadership, advances were made. It is probably not too far-fetched – considering how these advances were made within a context of sustained and increasing combativity of the broader movement, and considering the fact that when latter collapsed, the former were reversed too – to assume that the orientation of the broader movement was a key factor here.

The extraordinary gains that Ethiopian workers secured during the long decade preceding the revolution in terms of wages and position requires an explanation. While the political-economic context must be taken into consideration, it has been demonstrated that wage outcomes cannot simply be explained by productivity levels, as productivity shifts appear to have been completely disconnected from the movement of wages over the full period under review here[256]. Moreover, while relative abundance and scarcity of factors of production may be important in explaining wages, the Ethiopian waged workforce has, throughout this period, remained surrounded by mass unemployment. Not much has changed in this respect[257]. Killion, however, was entirely right when he pointed in the direction of the origin and type of surpluses extracted by the dominant classes in explaining a certain – perceived at least – laxness in the enforcement of repression of the labour movement in the urban economy by the imperial regime. Apparently, as it turns out, late imperial Ethiopia was not as consistently inhospitable to the labour movement as the literature has portrayed it[258]. Probably, this is linked to how the rulers perceived their interests: at the apex of the social structure was a class that relied almost exclusively on agrarian rents rather than industrial surpluses. To this class the urban waged sector may largely have appeared to be an irrelevance, a space of 'modernist' window dressing largely performed by and for foreigners. Corroborating this view, a CELU organiser at the time (Emmanuel 1983, interview with Tom Killion) has stated that 'they did not like the labour union, not even the government, they were very suspicious, but they

[256] Indeed, from the horse's mouth, the World Bank (2016: 51) in 2016 confirmed that 'in Ethiopia, real wages do not reflect productivity levels'.

[257] In West Africa, for example, Austin (2013) has argued that as a result of population growth real wages fell in the 1960s and 1970s, and, for unskilled workers, have continued to decline since. However, the fact that Ethiopia has possessed a huge reserve army of labour since the beginning of the period under examination – 20th century Ethiopia never having been as labour scarce as West Africa, but rather relatively land scarce – this cannot have been a decisive factor here.

[258] That having been said, as the data on dismissals imply, it was not necessarily very hospitable to the individual worker.

did not worry very much about it, because the people who had labour problems were foreign companies, local businessman, all [sic] of them [being] Armenians and Greeks'. Indeed, supporting this interpretation is the fact that the right to organise was not extended to the agrarian day-labourers working on the farms of the dominant classes and categories. Ironically – because of the egalitarianist political rhetoric which was deployed – it was the incoming post-revolutionary rulers and those who have ruled Ethiopia since who raised ambitions on surplus extraction in the waged sectors, and thus exacerbated pressure on wages[259]. It is not far-fetched to suggest that the collapse of real wages – always prone to political manipulation, and never merely the outcome of market factors – and the sharp ascent in the rate of exploitation discussed in the above is linked to this fact.

But while the political-economic context and the efforts of the state must have affected wage movements, even in its laxer phase it was not the state that functioned as the vector of wage gains. Rather, the force propelling the advance was the active pressure from the labour movements. The most conspicuous historical dynamic displayed in the above is the relation between real wage movement and levels of unrest: real wages increased in times where the most pronounced levels of unrest prevailed, and immediately embarked on a sharp downward trajectory after the collapse of the labour movement and the repression of unrest wages. This is true for the aggregate statistics from the national manufacturing sector as much as for both workplace samples tested in the above.

It is not only in hindsight that the correlation between the agency of workers in organising and engaging in unrest and the position of labour, measured in wages, becomes evident. It is also clear from the statements of a number of partisan participants – representatives of Ethiopian employers – of the time that this was how they conceived it. Moreover, in their statements it is possible to identify the reciprocal causation that has been termed the inspirational/demonstrative factor at work. First, the following excerpts from a memorandum written by FEE President and HVA Ethiopia executive J.M.J. Prakken in 1966 clarifies how successful collective industrial action inspired and fed into new rounds of unrest [author's emphases]:

> *Relative calm was disrupted by the illegal strike initiated in 1964 by the workers of EAL. In the second part of 1965 more labour difficulties developed which eventually culminated in an illegal strike at General Ethiopian Transport thus paralysing transport communications in Addis Ababa and all over the Empire of*

[259] See discussion in chapter 3.

> *Ethiopia.* ***It is regrettable that apparently no action was taken against the offending strikers concerned who infringed the law, as this seems to have encouraged others considering numerous strikes and slow-downs that erupted in various industries during the past few weeks****. In this respect we mention inter alia, a slow-down in A. Besse & Company, a general strike in Debre Berhan Wool Factory and a strike and slow-down in HVA-Ethiopia's Wonji and Shoa Factories, the latter lasting already for more than 15 days. In addition to this, there are reports about an increasing tendency of labour difficulties in many enterprises… **The prevailing labour unrest is either a consequence of previous illegal labour actions having remained unpunished**, or else that they are incited by agitators intent on embarrassing the Government.* (Prakken 1966)

Seven years later, the situation had not improved, and new wage gains were feeding into new unrest, and vice versa. FEE president of the time, Bekele Beshah, lamented that unpunished unrest led to growing boldness, and increasing wages [author's emphases]:

> *Industrial relations developments in Ethiopia seems to have taken a turn for the worse. The most recent spate of illegal strikes in at least three very important establishments all of which have gone unpunished are in our view a cause for concern. What is even more worrying is the flood of threats, intimidations and coercion that have been directed against the government – and against the responsible officials of the institutions that have been the victims of these illegal acts… It is obvious that there has been a growing misuse of union power which, unless checked by law and its effective and impartial implementation, will jeopardise the future of collective bargaining… Very important issues here, are the costs of such strikes in loss of production and harm to the economy, and the vulnerability they show of business in general and of the government and public at large to industrial action in key sectors… If organised labour is to play an effective role in the nation's economic endeavour they have to do it as insiders… and not as outsiders pressing their demands and imposing their wishes by brute, naked force of slowdowns and strikes… The irresponsible exercise of trade unionism is not to be taken lightly.* ***If no immediate legal remedies are implemented the chain of events very likely to be created*** *could without any doubt jeopardise economic stability the consequences of which are again quite catastrophic.* ***The submission to pressure, and intimidation as a result of which wages and other conditions of employment may be pushed up*** *will automatically bring in its wake a rise in prices and eventually a spiralling in wages and prices.* (Bekele 1973)

But as important as it is to point out the reciprocity of cause and effect in driving gains and further militancy, the reverse is evidently also true. Repression, subjugated structures and collapsing wages was eventually to lead to a vicious cycle of passivity and defeat. A negative path dependence that the Ethiopian labour movement, despite attempts, has not yet escaped.

7. Conclusions

In what follows the main findings are summed up and the implications of these findings on the literature are assessed. Prior to this, however, a brief note on the current conjuncture in the perspective of the socio-historical dynamics discussed is warranted.

Half a century of labour movementism in Ethiopia has produced mixed results. Advances have been followed by retreats, conjunctures in which an assertive orientation has been adopted have been enclosed in longer periods where a deferential outlook has prevailed, and periods of emerging autonomy and burgeoning activity have been followed by periods of repression, co-option and docility. In terms of the position and conditions of labour, few achievements have endured. It is not unfeasible, when taking stock of things, to conclude that the movement has come full circle, as a former labour leader has done (Hailu 2017, personal interview):

> *We are back to square one. We are now at the level that Ethiopian workers lived during the days of Aberra Gemu, when they fought for eight hours working day. We are there. We are back. We are back by fifty years after all this blood, tear and wear.*

In light of what has been presented, it is somewhat truistic to speak of contemporary plights of Ethiopian labour. The fact – highlighted in the citation above – that this state of things is the outcome of struggles that have seen a fair share of sacrifice aggravates its woefulness. However, it is only partially true that Ethiopian labour movement has little to show for in the present. Tangibly and structurally, there are few aspects of the current conjuncture worthy of celebrating, but there is a deep well of experience and important lessons that have been generated in the process. These experiences constitute foundations which any future advances must relate to and are likely to draw upon.

It is evident that the current configuration is neither inevitable nor immutable. Things have not always been this way, and they are highly unlikely to remain so perpetually. Moreover, the present configuration is very much the conjunctural outcome of past contestations, and past periods of tranquillity have rapidly shifted to periods of contestation. That ought to be a caution for those who act on the presumption that industrial peace and low labour costs are stable outcomes, whether engaged in planning or profiteering – much as the assumptions of planners and profiteers of yesteryears were dashed on the hard rock of class conflict. In many ways, the present appears ripe

for another advance of the Ethiopian labour movement, and there are, at the very least, a few signs that another era of contestation may not be very far off: in October 2017 alone there were, first, reports of a work stoppage at the Sher Horticulture Farm involving 4 000 strikers and the destruction of farm property; second, CETU publicly warned that should the government fail to negotiate and amend a new draft labour legislation it had presented, the confederation would call a general strike; and third, a strike broke out at the Castel Winery in which 1200 workers downed tools and barred management representatives as well as police officers from entering the premises (Fasika 2017b; Fasika 2017c; Addis Fortune 2017). The Castel Winery workers only agreed to recommence work after five days on strike, and after wage increments of up to 70 percent had been secured. Underlining the historical importance of these developments, they included the national centre's first explicit wielding of the general strike threat since September 1975, and, in terms of number of strikers, the greatest outburst of labour unrest since the early-mid-1990s at the very least. Reinforcing the impression of cyclical continuity, moreover, the draft labour law, which had triggered the confederation's warning, was condemned as a 'proclamation of slavery' in a statement issued by a group of exiled labour leaders (2017) – the very same label which the EPRP had attached to the 1975 labour law.

7.1 Determination of orientation

A number of factors that drove the development of assertiveness over the two cycles have been discussed in this dissertation. To begin with, pressures from below constituted the key force propelling the development of an assertive orientation during both cycles. In the first example, this was expressed in the high levels of unsanctioned unrest; the push from the rank-and-file on local representatives to call strikes; the pressures exercised, in turn, by workers' representatives on the central leadership to articulate assertive demands and to enforce them by militant practices; the emergence and crystallisation of a militant oppositional wing of the larger movement; the eventual toppling of the central leadership; the repeated re-election of radical representatives in the face of repression; and the development of a full-blown proletarian insurgency engulfing the waged economy through the mid-1970s. During the second cycle, pressures from below were most prominently expressed in the call from local unions, representatives and rank-and-file workers on the CETU leadership to call a general strike, but also in the manner in which spontaneous networks emerged from below in order to reconstitute the labour movement and prevent the state from determining its orientation. However, while pressures from below have been important in

propelling the development of assertiveness, the reasons why it has been forthcoming in differing degrees of force and traction need still to be accounted for.

The role assigned to vanguard/political movements operating within the labour movement does not appear as straightforward as that of internal pressures. While it may briefly have been important during the high tide of labour radicalism in the 1970s, that labour radicalism largely developed outside the influence of, and temporally prior to the existence of, any vanguardist organisation. This, however, is not to detract from the importance of the organisational resources and opportunities that the relationship between the radical labour movement and political organisations – the EPRP in particular – availed.

A factor that checked assertiveness and militant practices during both cycles was the role played by the state. This factor became most conspicuous during the phases of active repression that brought both cycles to end. In this sense, the counter-mobilisation of the state has constituted an important moderating factor, but it has not been determinant on its own. That is because there were periods when state repression was deployed but was unsuccessful in subduing the movement. In fact, heavy-handed state measures counter-intentionally fuelled the further development of assertiveness and militancy to some degree during both cycles. While state repression and harassment of the labour movement – repeatedly conducted in concert with employers – has constituted an enduring feature in the history of Ethiopian labour movementism, state control has been most effectively achieved when it has been outsourced to the labour bureaucracy, enabling the state to largely withdraw from the internal day-to-day operations of the movement. This has worked rather well during all periods of relative calm, where the role of the state has been reduced to the intermittent but important role of monitoring the boundary of permissible activity and reinforcing a co-opted labour bureaucracy with the credible threat of intervention should that boundary be crossed.

At this point, however, a note on the relationship between the political conjuncture and displays of labour assertiveness and militancy is warranted. It appears to be the case that periods in which the state's repressive capacity has declined have also been periods during which the labour

movement has displayed its most open combativeness[260]. This relationship is rather self-explanatory: the relative weakness of the state's repressive capacity presents and enhances opportunity. However, the role of such opportunity should not be exaggerated. Opportunity alone cannot generate successful contestation, and is meaningless in the absence of the other aspects of mobilisation: if grievances, perceptions of injustice, adversity, and rank-and-file militancy is not prevalent in the first place, opportunity cannot be exploited. Moreover, in the Ethiopian example the development of militancy and assertiveness largely took place during times when the state's repressive capacity was intact.

The process of bureaucratisation constitutes a moderating factor which was most conspicuously effective during the early phases of the first cycle. Here, a labour bureaucracy developed outside of the direct orbit of, and with only occasional incursions from, the state. In all subsequent constellations, the development of a deferentially oriented and separated layer of labour bureaucracy has required exogenous imposition and/or direction. However, another external entity was crucial to the consolidation of a moderate leadership – this was the international 'free' trade union movement. ICFTU and its allies closely monitored and interfered at all representative layers in order to dampen militant energies and to inculcate 'business unionism' among workers' representatives. Its most effective efforts were aimed at reinforcing the moderate leadership *within* the movement, giving it access to a range of resources and also directly assisting it in subverting democratic processes when these were deemed incompatible with the principles of anti-radical unionism. But while propping up the leadership, the ICFTU and allies also exercised control over the latter, making sure that it did not stray the slightest out of line, and did not hesitate to call on the state to collaborate in this endeavour. As a result, not only were militant energies suppressed, but so was the autonomy of the movement. While the same constellation of international organisations re-entered the fray with the foundation of CETU, and while they were not unimportant sources of moderating pressures during this cycle, the influence they exercised this second time was not as great. This was, first, because the conflict that embroiled the movement broke out before even CETU's affiliation request with the ICFTU was processed, and as a result the mundane form of bureaucratic unionism that most readily lends itself to external pressures

[260] This appears again to be the case with the October 2017 general strike threat, having been issued in the midst of a period of broader political unrest, and a – temporarily at least – decline in the state's ability to enforce order. However, it ought to be noted that the strike threat also came at a time when a most significant deterioration of labour rights had been announced.

could never develop; and, second, because the level of state interference and repression was too overt to be ignored by most affiliates of the international 'free' trade union movement. But the latter did not prevent some organisations, such as the AALC, from intervening to shore up the most obviously co-opted and deferential structures, and help to put a decisive end to what autonomous labour movementism remained.

A couple of contextual factors relating to social and professional divergences within the waged workforce have been discussed in the foregoing chapters. The nature of the influence that these factors have exercised has been shown to be contingent. However, a notable aspect of the development of assertiveness in the history of the Ethiopian labour movement is the prominent role of educated or skilled white-collar workers. This factor may not be as curious as it would appear, since white-collar workers have constituted a relatively large share of the workforce. When combined with the fact that assertiveness and militancy has not necessarily been forthcoming during the times when conditions and wages have been the poorest, it indicates that the objective economic conditions have not been central to the development of militancy and assertiveness. Neither does the effects of the structural position suggested by some authors – the high levels of unemployment and/or the relatively small size of the waged sectors – appear to have generated any one type of orientation on its own. Other factors are needed to account for the shifting degree of pressure from below, and the manner in which that pressure has been contained or given an outlet.

7.2 Effects of orientation

In the previous chapter it was demonstrated how wage improvements have coincided with high levels of unrest: both across the manufacturing sector, and at the two workplaces covered. The reverse also holds true: during periods of relatively low levels of unrest, wages have tended to fall. This does not by itself mean that causality has been established, but in light of the evidence of the impact of specific strikes on negotiated wages, a causative mechanism has been identified. Collective bargaining underlined by strikes and unrest frequently led to substantial improvement in wages during the 1960s and much of the 1970s. Since aggregate levels of unrest were high throughout the long decade this had a cumulative effect. In this manner the assertiveness and militancy of the labour movement led to significant wage gains. That this is how alarmed representatives of Ethiopian employers understood the unfolding process has also been

demonstrated, and by the end of the long decade, even the ILO was voicing concern about the level of wages. In light of this, it is hardly surprising that at the moment the Ethiopian labour movement collapsed – both organisationally and as a set of militant practices – real wages embarked on a sharp and lengthy decline. During the second cycle, strike activity and unrest again briefly flared up, but it was smothered early. This time, there was no immediately discernible effect of activity on aggregate wages. This does not, however, contradict the causative relationship outlined above, but rather underlines the importance of the endurance, repetitiveness and depth of activity – occurring repeatedly, at all levels, throughout an extended period – that characterised the first cycle.

Wages, of course, is only one aspect of the position of labour, and strike activity is only one aspect of orientation. The position of labour can also be illustrated by the social and political clout of organised labour, which grew considerably during the first cycle's long decade of contestation. The more assertive the movement grew, the more force did it appear to gather and the more influence did it command. In the late 1960s, employers had grown exasperated with their inability to pacify the movement, and by 1973, the successful bank strike signalled that the labour movement had become an autonomous force that the state would have to reckon with. This was merely confirmed by the 1974 general strike and its aftermath.

In terms of the conditions of labour, there is little comparable data that can be drawn upon to measure changes. However, it should be noted that while the 1975 labour law introduced severe restrictions on the collective rights of labour, it addressed many of the demands relating to individual labour rights – including employment security safeguards, health and vacation provisions etc. As has been demonstrated by the falling rate of dismissal, moreover, this led to a pronounced improvement in job security. There are therefore reasons to assume that the pressure exercised by an assertive labour movement eventually helped to generate certain betterments in the conditions of labour. The fact that many of these provisions have since – in times of lesser militancy and assertiveness – been removed, only serves to underline the effects of orientation on outcomes. Overall, there has been a marked impact of the Ethiopian labour movement on the labour regime – manifested both during periods of greater assertiveness and, in inverted shape through reversals, during periods where a more deferential orientation has prevailed.

Militancy and assertiveness has had another important effect. The attraction it has exercised on workers has been displayed in the membership gains that followed all major expressions of assertiveness: the general strike of 1974; the foundation of the Provisional Workers' Committee on an explicitly radical and assertive platform in 1975; and the CETU declaration of opposition to the structural adjustment programmes in 1994. This final point suggests an important aspect of assertiveness: it finds resonance and therefore enhances force – in other words, it goes hand in hand with clout, which, in turn enables the further development of assertiveness. If, then, these factors have reciprocally reinforced and kindled one another there is every reason to expect them to operate in a reciprocal interplay with other factors too.

For one, it appears that unrest – and thus militancy – has been correlated with the degree of autonomy of the movement. During times of high levels of unrest, as according to the periodisation in the previous chapter, the autonomy of the labour movement in general and of the national centre in particular tended to be relatively greater. This is not to suggest that autonomy has necessarily produced militancy, among other things because militancy in terms of wildcat action has largely been unsanctioned in the first place, but rather that militancy has generated space for the national confederation to operate more autonomously. Relative autonomy, meanwhile, has been an essential condition for all major advances, which in turn have attracted a broader membership, generating further clout. But there are more reciprocities at work, as will be made evident.

7.3 Reciprocal interplay of cause and effect: the inspirational/demonstrative factor

The reciprocal interplay between causes and effects of orientation is something that has been evidenced on a number of levels. This has imprinted a degree of path dependence on the process in which orientation is established. On the one hand, it has generated virtuous cycles of increased assertiveness, advances and betterment, and on the other it has generated vicious cycles of defeat and despondency. It may be posited that this factor is decisive in explaining why the pressure from the rank-and-file has been forthcoming to such different degrees, and has generated such different outcomes over different periods: when ignorable or surmountable, and when not. This would explain why, for example, rank-and-file pressure could more readily be overcome in 1965 or 1990, than in 1975; or why no meaningful pressure appears to have been forthcoming in 1980 or 2005.

It has been shown how the advances and gains achieved during the first cycle led to the continuous ratcheting up of demands and assertiveness; how this was reinforced by growing membership

numbers and militancy; how the workplace balance of forces began to shift; how strikes and unrest led to concessions from employers and the state, generating higher wages and growing autonomy; which in turn enabled the movement to make even bolder demands. At its peak, these demands included the full socialisation of all major enterprises, democratisation of workplace relations, and the subordination of management to the control of workers. Moreover, these demands were supported by a movement that had generated a proletarian insurgency and was expanding at a rapid pace. But when this movement was defeated – in conditions comparable to a civil war – demobilisation followed, reasserted control spelled the end to autonomy, and repression led to a rapid decline in militancy. The movement, consequently, had lost all clout. There were not to be any further concessions – none were necessary to a vanquished movement – but a hardening of conditions. As a result, wages collapsed and the position of labour slumped. In the tail end of the cycle, there was only resignation and docility. It would take a decade before new stirrings appeared.

When these stirrings emerged, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was not long before a renewed process of mobilisation and increasing assertiveness began. Unrest and protests were the first signs. When a new government came to power and dismantled the inherited structures of the labour movement, spontaneous networks and rearguard industrial action re-emerged in response. Eventually, a number of large strikes took place. More generally, the tranquillity that had characterised the industrial scene was replaced by contestation. The workers not only managed to press the government to permit the reestablishment of a national confederation, but through spontaneous networks they reasserted a certain level of control over the process, leading to the refoundation of a relatively autonomous confederation. However, the balance of forces were decisively tilted against the movement and the new confederation. The new government had embarked on a programme of liberalisation that was inimical to the interests of labour, and had already displayed an inclination to curtail the space available to the movement. From the outset, then, the labour movement's campaign was a defensive one. As much as efforts were made to halt the worsening of conditions, no major advances were attempted. Neither were the rank-and-file mobilised for any larger industrial contestation, not even when the government clamped down on the movement in earnest. As CETU's leadership decided to defend the confederation in courts of law rather than on the industrial scene and on the shop floors, each union was left to fend for itself. Any resistance was thus dispersed, and would eventually be defeated in isolation. In other words,

the reciprocal growth of factors could only just begin before it was halted and reversed. Instead, only a year after the establishment of the confederation, the labour movement was on a path of successive defeats, further curtailments, demobilisation, and declining levels of activity – all within a context of worsening conditions, mass retrenchments, and hollowing of rights.

The term inspirational/demonstrative factor has been proposed to describe the reciprocal interplay of factors outlined in the above, and to enunciate the mechanism by which these outcomes are produced. It is the inspiration that advances built on militant practices and an assertive orientation generate, and the demonstrative effect it has to convince workers and representatives of the viability and prudence of adopting a certain orientation, that explains the increasing lure of militancy and assertiveness within a virtuous cycle. Obviously, the opposite holds equally true: that an orientation or strategy that fails to result in any meaningful gains – or worse, that generates defeat and worsening of conditions – demoralises workers and demonstrates the imprudence of the prevalent path. In cases where an alternative path is available, this may very well be the preferred option, but where no such path appears to be open, it is likely to breed despondency and resignation rather than militancy. But this is a proposition that needs to be examined in light of the theory reviewed.

7.4 Implications for theory and the literature

7.4.1 Literature on the Ethiopian labour movement

A number of assumptions, portrayals and interpretations inherited from the literature on the Ethiopian labour movement lend themselves to review in light of the findings of this research. They include the portrayal of labour conditions and wages in imperial Ethiopia as particularly harsh; the assumption that few improvements were achieved during the long decade following the emergence of the Ethiopian labour movement; the view that the movement has consistently been weak, and the argument that this weakness has expressed itself in the consistent subordination of labour to the state; the somewhat contradictory notion that the close attention paid to the labour movement by the state has been irrational; the political-economic interpretation of the imperial regime's attitude towards organised labour; the subsumption of labour radicalism under the historiography of the 1974 revolution; and the attribution of labour radicalism to the role of ‘infiltrating’ agents in the labour movement. Several of these views requires reassessment in light of the findings in this dissertation.

To begin with, it appears that late imperial Ethiopia – contrary to the inherited wisdom – was not an environment as consistently hostile to organised labour and as resistant to its aims as the literature has indicated. In fact, when compared to subsequent regimes, the late imperial state comes across as the least intolerant in this regard. Late imperial Ethiopia saw the emergence of a vibrant labour movement, sustained industrial contestation, and a concurrent rapid increase of real wages across the unionised sectors. This was all to collapse rather abruptly, and the wage gains recorded in the 1960s and 1970s were consumed in the decade that followed. Despite Ethiopia's newfound pattern of economic growth in more recent years there are not very encouraging signs as to whether it is resulting in renewed wage gains. Late imperial Ethiopia remains, ironically, the hitherto comparatively most hospitable historical context for organised labour in the country.

Although the findings contradict Killion's portrayal of the imperial labour regime in this regard, they support his interpretation of the important role of different types of surpluses and forms of surplus extraction that dominant classes rely upon in determining the attitude of the state towards organised labour. While the imperial government, dominated as it was by landed rentier interests, could afford to ignore, or at least adopt an attitude of benign neglect towards wage labour, all subsequent governments have felt compelled to intervene more directly and severely to subjugate the labour movement and to exert downward pressure on real wages. The minister of labour and social affairs of the imperial government could speak of the importance of increasing wages and meetings the demands of labour. Subsequent administrations, on the other hand, have stressed profits, intensified surplus accumulation, and low labour costs. These are not merely rhetorical points, but reveal something about the underlying pattern of dominant interests.

While Killion's account of the role of the above-mentioned political-economic factor is convincing, his characterisation of the labour movement as having been perpetually weak and subordinated to the state is less persuasive. There are few reasons to accept the characterisation of relationship between the labour movement and the state in the first half of the 1970s as one of ‘subordination’. In fact, the opposite was true: eventually, the two parties were in open conflict. Neither is the determinant role assigned to the effects of other structural factors – the level of unemployment and the relatively minor size of the waged workforce – very convincing. A large ‘reserve army of labour’ has been a constant feature of the Ethiopian political economy. If this did not prevent the upward swing of wages in the first cycle, and if it did not prevent the emergence

of an assertive labour movement in the 1970s and 1990s, there are few reasons to believe that it would do so in the 1980s or 2000s. This also serves to refute Killion's assessment that CELU's strategy had failed to generate material and political gains. In fact, it has here been demonstrated that both the material conditions and political position of labour were substantially improved.

The findings presented corroborate the important role the state has played in repeatedly reining in the autonomy and assertiveness of the labour movement. However, while this factor has been important, it has not been determinant by itself. An assertive, militant, and autonomous labour movement has coexisted with repressively inclined and hostile governments in Ethiopia in the past. It may do so again, and the relationship is not mechanical. But the state has its reasons for aiming to prevent this. Aspiring to exercise close control over the labour movement is hardly, as Dessalegn has suggested, irrational. On the contrary: a militant and assertive labour movement has repeatedly shown that, whatever its relative size, it is capable of serious economic and political disruption. Its strategic location, its high concentration and its – in civil society – unparalleled level of organisation, means that the labour movement remains a force whose potential power is only matched by the disruptive potential of the demands it has articulated. These have, at times, pertained not only to the 'corporate interest' of wage workers, as the Ottaways would describe it, but the revolutionisation of the relations of production, the empowerment of working people, greater social justice, and a radical alteration of ownership structures.

Importantly, the findings presented in this dissertation dispels the validity of subsuming Ethiopian labour radicalism under the historiography of the Ethiopian revolution, and it puts to rests the notion that 'infiltration' can satisfactorily explain the upswings of assertiveness. These ideas have been refuted on several levels. To begin with, the sequence is not right. Labour radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s manifested itself in a longer arch, reaching far deeper into the past then neither the subsumption nor the idea of infiltration permit. Militant opposition to the moderate policies of the CELU leadership had existed for a decade, and had crystallised into an organised oppositional and militant wing of the labour movement several years before the explosion of urban unrest – which eventually came to lead to the revolution – began in February 1974. Militant energies had increased rapidly in the few years just prior to this. The 1972 decision of 30 militant unions to disaffiliate from CELU and the flare-up of serious labour unrest in 1973 constitute only the most glaring examples of this. Moreover, labour radicalism, in the form of the oppositional labour

movement, preceded the formation of the political parties that were deemed to have produced it by a full decade. It is not plausible to speak of conduction when the supposedly conducted activity commences prior to the arrival of the conductor.

Ethiopian workers have acquired militancy and assertiveness predominantly through their own experiences of injustice and adversity, in the workplace, in the unions, and in society at large. In this sense, Kelly's mobilisation theory appears to more accurately explain events than the notion of 'infiltration': the development of a sense of injustice and the establishment of adversarial relations had been attained by the time of – or at least soon after – the foundation of CELU. But in the mobilisation phase, leaders are important. When those leaders could no longer be overturned, so much worse for employers and the state. While such leaders emerged in the basic unions they initially had little influence over the broader movement. But this changed with the crystallisation of an oppositional labour movement, and its eventual seizure of control over CELU. Furthermore, when this radical leadership could draw support from the emergence of a broader social constellation of radical forces, it enhanced opportunity and resources available. Herein lies the major aspect of the importance of radical political movements operating in and with the Ethiopian labour movement. In the same manner, the social contagiousness of the urban uprising in 1974 and the initial openings the revolution presented may have been factors that favoured the further development of labour militancy, but they had not produced it. These factors had neither created the sense of injustice nor adversity – neither had they produced the radical labour leaders. Those were products of the experiences of Ethiopian workers in the practice of class contestation.

7.4.2 Theory

In addition to what has been discussed in the above, the findings presented in this dissertation are relevant to the theoretical literature in several ways. They pertain both to the literature on the dynamics that determine orientation, and to the literature on the effects of assertive strategies and militant practices. Moreover, in the discussion a possibility of bridging the divide between these two strands of literature has been identified, calling attention to the question of reciprocities between causes and effects.

To begin with, the findings corroborate theorisation on the moderating effects of bureaucratisation and of external pressures from the state and employers, as well as the international labour bureaucracy. The Ethiopian example also reinforces the view that trade unions perform dual roles,

serving both as mediums of collective power of workers, and simultaneously as mediums of exercising over workers. In checking unsanctioned militancy, the leadership of the Ethiopian trade union movement has repeatedly joined forces with employers and the state, enabling compound pressure to be exercised. However, when state and employers have displayed excessive heavy-handedness towards the labour movement, or when labour officialdom too blatantly has attempted to subvert internal democracy, this has repeatedly had the adverse effect: fuelling militancy among workers rather than smothering it. The Ethiopian example lends credence to the view that it is generally militant energies and pressures from below that propel the development of assertiveness. But it should be noted that in the Ethiopian case, labour officialdom has not always and straightforwardly supressed militancy. It has also relied on militant activity to justify its role and strengthen its hand vis-à-vis employers, the state and the international labour bureaucracy. While sometimes threatening the leadership, such militant energies and pressures from below has also served to carve out a space in which a certain degree of autonomy could appear. In other cases, it forced a reluctant leadership into confrontations it would have preferred to avoid.

In terms of outcomes, the findings support the strand of theory that emphasises assertive and militant agency as a key factor in improving the position of labour in general and wages in particular. The agency of workers, while embedded in the broader political economy, has shown to be a powerful factor in reproducing and altering it. In the literature reviewed, militant practices have been taken to have a key role in doing so. Cohn, for example, posited that frequent striking is usually an optimal strategy for extracting concessions, and van der Linden viewed the credible strike threat as a defining attribute of unions. Those views are largely supported by the Ethiopian example. The findings also corroborate the view that while organisation is an essential factor for workers to successfully engage in contestation, it is not a sufficient factor. It is the prevalence of militant practices and an assertive outlook that is decisive – the willingness to strike in particular. In the Ethiopian case the premium of militant practice – rather than unionisation alone – does not only appear to have been high, but has been manifested in both material and political gains.

Cohn, however, has suggested that striking is irrational when a movement is too weak. This may very well be the case, but it is unclear wherein such weakness resides. As discussed with regards to Killion's account of the structurally poor position of Ethiopian wage labour – in terms of a relatively small numerical size and in terms of prevailing mass unemployment – such weakness

did not stop the labour movement from extracting extensive concessions at different times. If this weakness explain why no major concessions could be extracted in 1995, why, one has to ask, could then such concessions be extracted in 1965? There is no conclusive evidence to be presented here, but it is difficult to accept that defeat was the destined outcome of a relatively poor position of the movement in the 1990s, if this was not the case three decades earlier.

As follows from to the demonstrated effects of militant agency on wages in Ethiopia, the findings have lent credence to the view that real wages cannot credibly be considered the mechanical outcome of aggregate economic growth, productivity levels, relative abundance/scarcity of factors of production, or any other one economistic factor alone. The notion of an explicitly political determination of real wages in African economies may have some bearing on this, but it would require some intermediary form of explanation. It appears likely, as Samir Amin's theorisation would lead one to expect, that the seemingly complete disconnect between productivity and wages exhibited in the Ethiopian case is somewhat related to the underdeveloped nature of the Ethiopian economy, and to the relatively small size of its wage labouring population. Certainly, the sharpness of the swings in real wage levels appears quite remarkable in the Ethiopian case. More than anything, they appear to be outcomes determined by the processes of contestation discussed.

Several aspects of the findings support Kelly's long wave/mobilisation theory of unrest, and related theorisation that emphasises the role of economic cycles on unrest. Indeed, economic upturns and downturns at least coincided with some shifts in the level of militancy among Ethiopian workers. The 1960s was a time of economic expansion in Ethiopia, and this expansionary cycle peaked in the early 1970s. The late 1970s to the early 1990s, on the other hand, largely constituted a period of stagnation. The insurgent mood of workers in the mid-1970s and the subsequent decline of both the economic conjuncture and militant energies among workers may, to some degree, be related, as this strand of theorisation would indicate. Similarly, it has been discussed how the broader political economy – and particularly the role of, and ambitions on, different types of surpluses and mechanisms of extraction – related with the intensity and outcome of contestation. However, economic cycles are not sufficient to explain what took place in Ethiopia, nor did they always tally with the ups and downs of militant activity. The phase of rapid expansion from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, for example, was not matched by any significant re-emergence of activity, as theories emphasising the role of business cycles would predict.

What is required to explain the above in a comprehensive manner is a modified version of Screpanti's theorisation on proletarian insurgencies: indeed, as he indicated, there appears to be a reciprocal relation between advances in the position of labour, on the one hand, and the development of militancy and assertiveness, on the other, reinforced by expanding ranks of workers attracted to the achievements and inspired by energies released. Equally, the reverse can happen, breeding a cycle of defeat, despondency and docility. Both aspect of this dynamic has an element of path dependence that has been displayed in the recent history of the Ethiopian labour movement. But the Ethiopian example indicates that these reciprocities need not be subjected to any overarching business-cyclical logic to operate perfectly well. The inspirational/demonstrative factor of advances built on assertiveness and militancy is entirely sufficient in explaining the emergence of such virtuous cycles, while successive defeats, associated with the adoption of a deferential outlook or a strategic unwillingness to engage in militant practices, and underlined by a passive membership, is entirely sufficient in explaining the emergence of the reverse cycle. This element effectively unifies the theoretical strands of literature. Because while, on the one hand, militancy and assertiveness has been seen leading to advances in the position of labour, on the other, it has been demonstrated that indeed 'there is a positive cumulative effect of past experience in relation to actual claims', as Screpanti stated. In other words, the effects of a certain orientation can explain many of its causes, and vice versa.

When it comes to theorisation on the particularities of African labour and trade union movements, the findings of this research has some relevance too. Indeed, it has been found that state encroachment on autonomy has generally been severe in Ethiopia, and it has been demonstrated that the Ethiopian labour movement, even in its more autonomous phases, has tended to be drawn into close engagement with the state. This lends credence to the view that African labour movements frequently operate on the explicitly political level. However, since the historical context in Ethiopia is different from those in which an alliance between national liberation movements and labour movements emerged, this poses the question of what precisely it is that generates this condition. This question, however, must remain largely unaddressed for the time being, in lack of the necessary comparative data. What is clear from the Ethiopian case is that whichever level of autonomy from the state that the labour movement has at different times acquired, has had to be won in contestation. Moreover, the Ethiopian example lends support to the view that the heavy external dependence of many African labour movements, itself partly an

outcome of poor finances, has been a factor severely curtailing autonomy, and the development of assertiveness. On the other hand, however, the national-ethnic fragmentation and the relatively minor size of the waged workforce has not appeared to have imposed significant limitations on neither the development of assertiveness, militancy, nor clout. As suggested in the literature, the restraining effect of size has probably to some degree been offset by the centrality of the economic and strategic location of the workforce.

To conclude, it has been demonstrated how militancy, assertiveness and organisation have constituted key factors in advancing the position of Ethiopian labour, and how a virtuous cycle of increasing assertiveness, force, and positional advances can be created. However, it is probably feasible to assume that within a certain mode of production, there must be some outer limits to the extent to which this position can be altered. The capitalist enterprise, to take a relevant example, cannot remain viable without generating profits, and so its bottom line, as Cohn suggested, will always constitute an outer limit to struggles over surplus allocation[261]. This calls the conception of trade unions and workplace struggles as 'schools of war' to mind, indicating that they constitute the location of learning, and that the proverbial[262] 'war' – its decisive engagement at the very least – is fought out elsewhere. This may be somewhat of an overstatement, since the delimitation of economic contestation from political can never be as straightforward. Nevertheless, incremental gains in the position of labour are subject to reversals whenever shifting balances of forces permit – concessions over the degree of surplus extraction may always be retracted, as long as the wage mechanism of extraction remains in place. And so, in the absence of its abolishment, one is left with a perpetual string of cycles recurring within substantially unaltered terrain. In light of this it can be contended that in the absence of that party of which Perry Anderson wrote – that element of 'historical negativity', which takes as its task to fundamentally transform the social terrain in which the battles are fought out rather than merely advance within it – all advances carry within them the seed of eventual reversal.

[261] Moreover, it cannot remain profitable, in a competitive context, without squeezing costs, which sets another limitation to wage formation. On the level of the capitalist state, it is most likely to aim to enhance the exploitative competitiveness of the national economy, thereby setting a limit to what overall wage movements is tolerable.
[262] 'War', in this context it is to be recalled, refers to the explicitly political struggle over state power.

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